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The Butterflies Take Flight on Christmas Eve - Part 2

Part 1

As night approaches, the December cold gradually seeps into my toes and any exposed skin. The cold of winter is merciless, just like anger and hatred. It doesn't listen to my fears or protests.

Yoshimi-san is standing completely still, faintly illuminated by the light of my phone. She looks sinister and terrifying, like she came straight out of a horror movie. No, maybe that's just what I want to believe. That, or maybe a nightmare. If only this wasn't real. I want to wake up so that all of this would be over. My skin is covered in goosebumps from the cold and fear. I instinctively grab Sakurako-san's arm. This isn't a dream. I have to run away.

"I won't give you the doll's head. It belongs to my sister and I," Yoshimi-san says in a monotone voice. "If you guys get in my way, I won't show you any mercy."

"…We have no interest in the head of a doll made of ash. You could throw it away for all we care. You look unsteady. Both of you need medical attention," Sakurako-san says as calmly as she can while pointing at the concrete block.

Yoshimi-san is bleeding from her nose and mouth. It looks painful. I don't know if Chiba-san, who is lying at my feet, is dead or alive. All I know is that I can smell blood in the humid air.

"All the fear, pain, and anger has you high on adrenaline. If you think about it carefully, you'll realize that this situation isn't in your favour," Sakurako-san says, holding out her hand to Yoshimi-san, but she flinches and steps back.

"Don't come any closer."

I can feel her agitation through the air.

"We're not going to do anything to you. Think about whether this is the best option for you."

"I don't care anymore. I don't care about what happens to me."

"That's a contradiction," Sakurako-san says, dropping her voice. I can hear her voice tremble at the end of her sentence. I can't tell if she's nervous, or just cold.

“If you were desperate, you wouldn’t care about any of that. Since you do care, doesn’t that mean you want to live?” Sakurako-san says in a serious tone. Her voice doesn’t tremble at all this time.

I can’t see Yoshimi-san’s expression very clearly in the dim light. All I can see is that she has her head down.

“You need to collect yourself. This isn’t right for you.”

“…” I hear Yoshimi-san let out a small breath.

“Come on, now. We won’t harm you. At the very least, you know this kid wouldn’t do that, right? This boy kept you in this world that day. This kid, out of everyone, could never hurt you,” Sakurako-san says.

She’s right, I’d like to treat Yoshimi-san’s injuries right away, if possible. But at the same time, I’m worried about Chiba-san, who’s collapsed on the ground, and Sakurako-san and my own safety as well. But Sakurako-san doesn’t seem to be thinking about herself at all. She moves slowly and quietly, like she’s trying not to scare a wild animal.

“I told you to stay back!” Yoshimi-san shouts. She’s crying, probably from fear.

“Let me check Chiba’s injuries. It’s for your sake, too. I don’t want you to become a murderer.”

“If he lives… I’ll be held responsible anyway. It’s better if he dies like this.”

“This man hit you first earlier. It was self defense. I will testify.”

“…”

Yoshimi-san seems unsure of whether or not she can trust Sakurako-san, but still, she needs to trust us.

“Yoshimi-san, you need to get medical treatment, too… I know you’re worried, but Chiba-san used force first earlier,” I add as I carefully move toward Sakurako-san.

I suddenly hear the clanging of metal at my feet, and nearly fall down. It’s the metal bat Chiba-san had earlier.

“Ah…”

It was originally in Yoshimi-san’s car, and intended to be used on the culprit who murdered Chiba-san and Sakurako-san’s family members— a violent choice. Fortunately it hasn’t actually been used as a lethal weapon, but it’s still dangerous. In an instant, I can feel the

tension in the air. I gulp. I slowly lift my foot as the metallic clanging echoes through the tunnel. At the same moment, Yoshimi-san and Sakurako-san move. Yoshimi-san moves just a bit faster, but she's further away, and the tunnel is dark. Sakurako-san gets her hands on the bat first. She holds onto it tight so that Yoshimi-san can't use it.

"…Are you going to kill me?" Yoshimi-san mutters weakly.

"No. You're the only one here that wants to use this thing."

She's right. Sakurako-san and I don't want to use it. We don't want anyone to use it. I can see Yoshimi-san's eyes shining in the dark.

"I had no intention of hurting you, either… To tell you the truth, I was going to beat this man to death, then drop the bat and his corpse into the river" Yoshimi-san says, looking at Chiba-san on the ground.

"Into the river? With this bat?"

"Yes."

"In that case, it's good that you didn't."

"Hm?"

"Metal bats don't sink."

"Huh? B-but…"

"It isn't metal all the way through. Plus, it's completely sealed, which allows it to stay buoyant. It won't sink in water. They say that it's rare for a dead body to come up after falling into the river here, but the bat definitely would have floated away. Think about how boats still float, even though they're made of metal."

"…" I can hear Yoshimi-san gasp.

I used to think they sank, too. I only found out that they don't after reading a mystery novel. Yoshimi-san falls to her knees, like she lost all her strength.

"There's no need to be discouraged. It just isn't what you originally imagined. Nobody has died yet."

Sakurako-san is trying hard not to show any emotion, but I can tell from experience that she's nervous. I'm worried. Yoshimi-san is all beat up, and we have to stop Chiba-san's bleeding.

"…In the end, it's always the same for you two. You're always in the right ," Yoshimi-san mutters. She has her knees up, with her face

buried in them. “It was the same with my sister. She took everything from me as if it were nothing. It was as easy as breathing for her.”

“I’m not like Kiyomi. I have no intention of taking anything from you. Honestly, I’m not interested in you or the doll heads. Anyway, let me treat him. You can do as you like— actually, no. Give me one of the heads.”

“No!”

“Just the one from Asahiyama Zoo. If we return it right away, we can avoid causing any more of a disturbance. It’d be better to conclude this without creating any problems, right?”

“…”

She protested at first, but now she’s fallen silent while she thinks over Sakurako-san’s suggestion again.

“After that, you can do whatever you want. It’d be best if you ran away. I’ll take full responsibility for this man,” Sakurako-san says resolutely.

Yoshimi-san lets out a small surprised noise. “…Why?”

“Because I know you were fooled, too. It was a crude and poorly made plan, so the fact that it wasn’t stopped means you’re probably being controlled by someone who doesn’t care about what happens to you. They were probably hoping you’d self-destruct.”

“…You’re making fun of me.”

“That’s not true. People each have their own strengths and weaknesses. I don’t think you’re brave enough to frame someone else, so go. Escape while you can.”

“…You should run away too, then. How much are you going to wrap that kid up in this? He’s just a child, but you’re getting him involved in a robbery and murder case?”

“Chiba isn’t dead yet.”

“It’s only a matter of time.”

She’s right, he’s not in a very good situation right now.

“We should call an ambulance. Boy,” Sakurako-san says, so I take out my phone.

“Don’t!” Yoshimi-san shouts.

“Yoshimi-san…”

“No ambulance, and no police. If I abandon him here, no one will find him until spring,” Yoshimi-san murmurs anxiously.

There’s no way that’s possible.

“…I don’t think this choice will make you any happier.”

I know I shouldn’t make her any more agitated or emotional, but although I’m hesitant, I tell her.

She laughs softly. “How many people do you think are happy with their lives? Whatever, give me your phone.”

“Ah…”

“I told you, didn’t I? No cops.”

“…”

I have no choice but to do as I’m told and hand over my phone. She takes it and puts it in her pocket.

“Do whatever you want, but you’ll probably regret it,” Yoshimi-san says before she leaves. In exchange, she presses the doll head against my chest.

With our only light source gone, we’re surrounded by darkness. Maybe it’s the darkness, or the cold, or the pain from earlier, but I can only take shallow, shaky breaths as Yoshimi-san walks away.

“Sakurako-san…”

“Don’t worry about it right now. Just leave it be,” Sakurako-san says shortly as she takes a penlight out of her pocket.

Treating Chiba-san comes first. Since he has a head injury, there’s a lot of blood. Sakurako-san appears to be applying pressure to the wound with a handkerchief. I hold out my handkerchief to her. The air smells like blood, like life.

“He’s okay. He has a pulse, at least, but we need to stop the bleeding.”

“Good…”

“Boy, shine the light for me.”

I take the light and shine it on her hands where she directs me. It’s a small, faint ray of light, but it’s all we have right now.

“Maybe we should take him to the car?”

“We need to stop the bleeding first.”

It’s hard for two people to carry an adult man. The bleeding will get worse if we move him, too. Sakurako-san has a grim look on her

face. She says it would be best to secure the wound as much as we can.

"Ugh…" Chiba-san groans, probably from the pain of having pressure applied to his wounds.

"Is he starting to wake up? Don't let him pass out. Shoutarou, talk to him."

"What should I talk about…"

"Anything. Teach him about skulls."

He's not like us, though. "I-is that okay…?" I ask after thinking about it for a moment.

Chiba-san lets out a weak breath that almost sounds like a laugh. "Will I… be… okay…?"

"Huh? Uh… P-probably…"

Chiba-san's face distorts from pain as he closes his eyes again. I call out to him, panicked. My mouth moves faster than I can think.

"Ah! Um! Please tell me."

"About what?" Chiba-san opens his eyes slightly.

"I… I'd like to hear about your little sister. Just a bit is fine."

"…"

Chiba-san is silent for a while. I panic thinking he lost consciousness again, but it seems he was just thinking.

"What do you… want to hear?"

"It might help us figure something out. I'd like to hear about her, too," Sakurako-san softly tells Chiba-san once he eventually replies.

"…No one would listen to me…"

"It was the same for me. None of the adults would take the words of a child seriously, but you were the last person to see your sister. Tell me what you saw, and what you felt. Do you remember? What was the weather like that day?"

"…" Chiba-san takes a shallow breath before answering Sakurako-san's question. "It was sunny… the evening sun made the clouds look like blood…"

Little by little, Chiba-san begins to speak. Sakurako-san listens to him as her white shirt is dyed bright red by his blood.

That day, Yuzuki-chan followed Chiba-san because she wanted to play. They came to the bridge. She was wearing her brand new pink

sneakers, and a denim jumper skirt with embroidered pockets.

"I want to come with you!" She cried as she followed him.

Chiba-san wasn't old enough to take his very young sister with him when he went to hang out with his friends, so he just kept shouting at her to go home. Normally he would have been a bit nicer, but he was already running late for his meet up with his friends that day. That's why he said it. He told her to go home before it gets dark. He scolded his crying sister.

There's deep regret in his voice as he tells his story. I don't blame him, I feel bad for him. Chiba-san was a young boy with his own friendships outside of his family, not a toddler anymore. He couldn't keep prioritizing his sister forever. I remember that my older brother used to get annoyed with me all the time. At the very least, it's wrong to blame him, since he was only a kid. He has regretted it and hated himself for a long, long time.

That day, I should have taken Yuzuki home.

But Chiba-san didn't do that. He left his sister behind, rather than taking her back home himself. After finally giving up, Yuzuki-chan turned her back to Chiba-san and started to walk away. He turned around a few times, but she was still walking down the sidewalk with her head hanging down. Chiba-san says that the image of her walking away dejectedly is still burned into his eyes. His memory has faded over the years, and now he can barely remember what her face looked like.

The one thing he can say for sure is that they weren't far enough from home for her to get lost. There were other pedestrians, too. She was cautious and timid, so she would never accidentally fall while looking down at the river; or follow a stranger, even if it was an acquaintance. He asserts weakly that his sister was wary of anyone who wasn't an immediate family member.

But all the adults denied him. They said that they can't trust what a child says or does. Some people said that Yuzuki-chan was neglected, or that she would have just followed anyone who spoke to her. Some even suggested that Chiba-san was jealous of his sister and pushed her into the river. None of that was true. One single

“coincidence” that day had the Chiba family painted as child-murdering demons.

Sakurako-san listens to Chiba-san’s story while still applying pressure to his wounds. There’s no expression on her face. I wonder if Sakurako-san suffered through the same heartless comments and disgraceful rumours as he did. Even if she did, I doubt she’d care. She wouldn’t have gotten upset or sad about it. That’s just the kind of person she is. If someone said those things about me, I’d be so frustrated I wouldn’t be able to bear it. It must have been painful for Chiba-san, who isn’t as emotionally strong as Sakurako-san is.

The people who say those selfish things don’t understand anything. Crimes, tragedies, and misfortune do not only fall on those who do bad things. People will say that they’re being punished for something, or that it’s their own fault, but that’s not necessarily the case. No matter how virtuous a person is, how kind, pure, and upright they live, tragedy will one day suddenly befall them, possibly for no reason at all. Those who ridicule others’ misfortune with venomous words have no idea that one day they may find themselves in the exact same situation. Whether they’re the victim, or as the perpetrator.

“It’s the people who abduct children and make them suffer who are at fault. You, Yuzuki-chan, and your family are not evil,” I say, unable to hold back my frustration anymore.

Tears stream down my cheeks. Chiba-san looks up at me, surprised.

“…It’s fine.” Chiba-san raises his weak voice. He gestures for Sakurako-san to move her hands off of him.

“What?”

“Just… leave me be.”

“Your wounds are deep. The bleeding on your head is severe. We have to stop the bleeding, then—“

“It’s fine… I don’t know what I’d do if I survive.”

“Fine? What is?”

“…”

He doesn’t say anything more. He just closes his eyes. I understand what Chiba-san is saying. He’s given up. On everything. His everyday life, future, and goals were all taken away with his

sister… Now he's facing toward a gentle light. Even if he gets out of here alive, he'll spend the rest of his life trapped in a dark tunnel. Rather than walking down a path with no light in sight, unable to exact revenge, he might as well-

"…No. It's not fine," Sakurako-san says. "No matter what, you're alive, so you have to survive."

"What…?"

"No one needs permission, forgiveness, reason, or a right to live. Those born into this world have to live, no matter what. Even if there's unhappiness, crime, injustice, or inequality."

Sakurako-san restrains Chiba-san and puts pressure on his wound again. He groans in pain.

"I know it hurts, but the pain is proof that you're still alive, and your body is trying to survive. Death is a standstill. Everything stops. It doesn't feel peaceful, or like release. It's the end. Everything goes away. Your emotions do, too. Even if it hurts so bad that you want to die, you're still alive, and you're struggling to survive. Your heart beats on, like the second hand on a clock. It's because time doesn't stop that life has meaning, and there's still value even after death."

Time doesn't stop.

I remember Sakurako-san saying the same thing to me under the sunset when I'd lost sight of myself. She's right, it doesn't stop. Life continues with every beat of the heart.

"There's no value in me, whether I live or die…"

"There's no such thing as a person without value. No life is worth more or less than any other. If it's too painful to stay where you are, run away. If your bonds are too heavy to carry on, toss them aside. If your feelings ever become a burden, ignore what everyone else says and cut them off. Continuing to live is more precious than anything."

"…"

"If you understand, then get up. The bleeding has stopped for now. It'll hurt, but we have to get out of here," Sakurako-san says before she stands up and holds her hand out to Chiba-san.

But he stays on the ground, making no attempt to get up. Sakurako-san lets out a short sigh.

“Let’s try this, then. I have about 700 000 yen saved up at home. That’s about how much one of those dolls costs to buy. I thought I could buy one legally instead of stealing it… But thankfully, we got the head back. I’ll invest the money in you instead.”

“…Invest?”

“I don’t care whether you pay me back or not. It might not be enough money to start anything big, but it’ll at least let you explore options other than death.”

“A… Are you serious…?”

“Yes, I am. You’ve had so much taken from you, it’s okay to take a little **.** Let your wounds heal, then you can think about living again.”

“But why…?”

Sakurako-san is acting like it’s no big deal, but it’s only natural for Chiba-san to be surprised. I kind of get it, though.

Chiba-san is in no condition to move on his own, of course, so Sakurako-san and I lend him our shoulders as we walk down the abandoned tunnel. Step by step. Chiba-san is desperately trying to walk, but he keeps going in and out of consciousness. He becomes heavier with each step. Still, we eventually make it out. Unlike the stagnant air in the tunnel where it feels like the flow of time has stopped, the air outside is clear and fresh. That’s what I think as I take my first breath and the cold stabs the inside of my nose. The cold wind from the river mercilessly cuts into my lungs. The other side looks so far away.

Chiba-san has held onto consciousness so far, but he won’t be able to move much further. But what we feel isn’t despair, but *relief* .

“…Boy?” Sakurako-san looks at me with surprise.

An ambulance is driving into the parking lot on the opposite shore.

“I’m so glad…” I sigh and smile at Sakurako-san. “It was Isozaki-sensei.”

“What do you mean?”

“I made a phone call on speaker phone earlier.”

Right. I made it look like I was just using it for the light so Yoshimi-san and the others wouldn't find out. Isozaki-sensei was able to figure out my intention from there.

—Please, just be quiet for a minute and listen to me.
—There's two people injured and bleeding in a place like this, in the middle of winter… And here the two of you are, trying to hurt each other even more… It's not right. What we need now is an ambulance and a police car, not a doll's head.

Isozaki-sensei knew something was off, so he did as I said and stayed quiet while calling an ambulance to the Kamuikotan tunnel.

"Well done," Sakurako-san says. It's rare for her to praise me.

At the same time, I feel the cold in my chest melt away from my gratitude toward Isozaki-sensei.

"Chiba. Come visit me once you've been treated. It's an old, white, western style building straight down the road from Nagayama shrine. I'll be waiting," Sakurako-san says as she stares dazzlingly at the emergency lights. "Your sister is dead, but you're alive, and so am I. My little brother is dead, but I'm alive."

I feel Chiba-san's body tense up.

"We're alive, so let's keep living."

Part 2

When I made the call, I didn't think an ambulance would be enough, but seeing the police car pull up, I start regretting it. By the time the ambulance arrived, Yoshimi-san was gone, along with her car and the fake culprit. His rental car is still here, though. The glass is still broken, with blood stains around it. It takes quite a lot of effort to explain the situation to the police and get them to understand. Of course, we can't tell them the whole truth.

"We rented a car and came to check out this haunted spot in Kamuikotan , but we had an accident because of the snow on an unfamiliar road. One of our friends collapsed and hit his head on a concrete block in the tunnel, and got seriously injured."

"I panicked and called my home room teacher. He was worried, so he called for the police and an ambulance, but there wasn't any

major trouble, just our friend's injuries. All three of us deeply regret that this happened due to our curiosity."

Sakurako-san and I beg for the police officer's forgiveness. It doesn't change the fact that we entered a restricted area and caused them trouble. After Chiba-san is taken to the hospital, we get scolded by the police, but we manage to cover up Yoshimi-san's reckless murder plot. I'm relieved, honestly. The police are worried about what we're going to do next. There's no way we can drive home with the car like this.

"I'll stay away from driving on unfamiliar roads, and I've already contacted the rental place. My friend is coming to pick me up soon, so there's nothing to worry about," Sakurako-san says calmly, hiding the truth of the situation.

Is it really okay for her to say that, though? Yoshimi-san took my phone, so we can't even call anyone… At that moment, a car pulls into the parking lot.

"Oh, here he comes. That's my friend." Sakurako-san smiles and waves.

At first, I thought it's a stranger who just happened to pull in here, but then I see a familiar face in the driver's seat.

"…Huh? Oh…"

If Sakurako-san says they're friends, then I suppose they are, but I didn't think they were particularly close… Still, I feel relieved when I see his face. But why? Why is Yamaji-san here? I don't voice that thought, I just instinctively look at Sakurako-san. She furrows her brow just a little, like she's telling me not to say anything.

"…"

I know she gave me that look, but… well, it can't be helped I guess. I'll just have to hear about it in the car.

"What took you so long?" Sakurako-san says as she climbs into the passenger seat.

I follow suit.

"You should be glad that I even got here from just that one insect pin."

Yamaji-san glances at us to make sure we fastened our seatbelts before he starts the car.

“Insect pin?”

“I knew you’d be fine. You got here, after all,” Sakurako-san says with a bold smile.

I don’t get the whole story. “…What do you mean?”

“There’s a wiretap.”

“Huh?”

“Yamaji-san is listening in on my house using a bug that was installed.”

“…What?”

“That way we can tell what information is being leaked. When Yoshimi contacted me today, I repeatedly said I was going to Asahiyama to retrieve a doll so he’d understand. I left my insect pin on the map at the zoo so he’d know where we went afterwards.”

I see, so then… Still, asking your acquaintance to wiretap your house is very eccentric. Very Sakurako-san-ish.

“Oh… So that’s why Yamaji-san called the police here?!”

“No, there’s another reason,” Yamaji-san denies it with a bitter smile.

Is that so? He doesn’t seem to want to explain the other reason, so there’s a lull in the conversation.

“…So what should I do? Where am I supposed to go?” Yamaji-san asks Sakurako-san to start the conversation over again.

It looks like the car is heading toward the city right now.

“Head to Asahiyama first. I have to return the doll’s head.”

“But Sakurako-san—“

“I know. Let’s stop by Yoshimi’s house while we’re at it. It’s in the same direction, anyway,” she says.

“I hope she went to the hospital to get checked out… I’m worried about the fake culprit, too…”

It’s a strange feeling. To put it bluntly, Yoshimi-san, Chiba-san, and the fake culprit are all criminals. They’re not exactly good people. I know I should be defending them, but at least Yoshimi-san and Chiba-san’s plans were too immature, and lacked proper planning. It’s sad to think that they were being lied to and tricked. It’s easy to say that they were just foolish, but their actions were driven by anger, hatred, and sadness.

I still feel a little bit guilty about it. Because we investigated An-san's death, Yoshimi-san's husband died. We took away the peace she had finally found. Snow starts to fall on Asahikawa. I stare blankly out the car window as I think about the two of them. This car smells unfamiliar. Did the ghosts - the specimens - want them to commit a crime and destroy ourselves? If that's the case, I'm glad things didn't go their way, and we got to help the two of them.

"I don't think either of them are bad people. I'd say that they just took the wrong path, or that the environment they live in didn't give them many options…"

Chiba-san lost so much due to his sister's death that he almost gave up on living.

"…But still, a crime is a crime," Yamaji-san mutters softly from the driver's seat.

"There are countless people who commit crimes because they 'had no choice.' No matter how pitiful their situation may be, a crime is a crime. Both the perpetrator and the victim have their own lives and families."

"…"

That's right. Even the fake culprit that they almost murdered has a family.

"Even if extenuating circumstances are taken into account, it doesn't negate the damage done. No matter how much you pity the perpetrator, the victim still suffers the same loss," Yamaji-san says with a hateful expression.

I know that, of course, but…

After changing our blood-covered shirts on the way, we arrive at Asahiyama Zoo. It's already closed, though. I borrow Yamaji-san's phone and call Sawa-san. He's surprised to see that we're returning the doll head (even though we stole it), but he accepts it without asking too many questions. It's not unthinkable that Sakurako-san would decide she wants to steal a doll with her personality being the way it is. Sawa-san has a grim expression on his face, but he doesn't ask why we're bringing it back, since he figures we have our reasons. But the truth is, I was told to steal it.

As we return to the parking lot, I apologize from the bottom of my heart to Sakurako-san, Sawa-san, and the zoo. Apparently Sakurako-san left her car in the zoo parking lot. We thank Yamaji-san before parting ways. As soon as Sakurako-san starts the engine, the sound of Diavel's singing rings in my ears.

Sakurako-san looks calm on the surface, but I wonder if she's actually a little bit worried on the inside. After she fastens her seatbelt, she lets out a sigh of relief. She didn't want to cause trouble for Sawa-san. I'm relieved to finally be in her car, with the familiar scent and music. I wonder when this car started to feel like a safe place to me…

I want to check what time it is, but I realize that Yoshimi-san still has my phone. I know she isn't likely to misuse it, and all my contacts and pictures are saved in the cloud, so I won't lose anything important, but I feel bad asking my mom to buy me a new one. I feel strangely uneasy knowing that I don't have my phone with me.

"I wonder if Yoshimi-san is at her house…"

I lean forward and check the time on the car navigation system. It's already past 5pm.

After driving just a few minutes away from Asahiyama, I can already see Yoshimi-san's house. The lights are all off, and there's no footprints in the light dusting of snow we've gotten. It's quiet… For some reason, I get the feeling that nobody has been here for days. It almost feels like I'm looking at an abandoned building. Even so, Sakurako-san and I get out of the car and walk up to ring the intercom. The wind is freezing. Even with my coat pulled closed, I'm still cold.

"…She's not here."

"Yeah."

"I hope she went to the hospital…"

She might not even be living here anymore. I don't know if she has packed her things already or not, but this is the place where her husband died, and where she tried to kill herself. It wasn't very long ago. It must hurt to be alone in such a sad place. I hope she has a friend or someone to be with so she isn't alone. Then she might not get obsessed with killing people and stealing from them…

"…What should we do?"

There's no leads as to where Yoshimi-san is. I'm worried about her, but I'm also wondering what's going on with my phone…

"We really shouldn't have let her escape like that, huh?" Just as those words are about to escape my mouth, I swallow them.

Even though I didn't say it, my thoughts are obvious. Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders, looking troubled.

"It couldn't be helped. We couldn't leave Chiba like that, and Yoshimi isn't the kind of person who could go any further on her own."

"I hope so…"

"There's a saying that goes 'a cornered rat will bite a cat.'"

Sakurako-san crosses her arms and looks up, lost in thought. She's right. I don't think Yoshimi-san is an aggressive person by nature, but you never know what someone might do when they're set on something.

"Since she took my phone, I wonder if there's some way to find her using GPS…"

It'd be nice if it was turned on, but I think it's probably shut off… I would have turned it off, at least. Either way, I can't do anything until I get home and use the computer. All that's left to do is contact the company that the fake culprit rented his car from, make sure everyone is okay, then think about what to do next.

We went by the late Kiyomi-san's apartment, but there weren't any lights on in there, either. Yoshimi-san's car wasn't parked there, and it looks like someone new is renting the apartment now.

It's already past 6pm, somehow.

"Let's go back home for now. You should have dinner at my house. Ume will be delighted."

I always wonder if I'm being a nuisance when I suddenly show up like this. She has ready-made side dishes that can be prepared quickly for situations like this, though, and Gran says it's more motivating seeing someone suddenly show up and enjoy the food she makes, rather than eating alone with Sakurako-san who's picky. I want to play with Hector, too, so I accept her offer. I'm looking forward to dinner. I wonder if we're having meat or fish? Or what about those potatoes the other day that were soft and fluffy inside, with the skin fried until it was crispy… I wonder if she'll make it again…

I have so many unpleasant, anxious feelings in my chest that I can't sit still. Thinking about Gran's food makes me feel calm, despite my aimless feeling of frustration. But there's limits to what I can do.

"Right now I just need to eat well, and prepare myself for the best case scenario," I think to myself during the car ride.

Now that I think about it, I was too optimistic. That day, I was completely unaware of what someone was doing in another location. I thought I was the one having a rough day. But that wasn't the case at all…

The air in the Kujou house feels different from usual, somehow. I don't know why. It's like there's this odd, uncomfortable feeling gradually overtaking me. I can hear Hector barking. Is it because he's excited that we're coming back? Still, he's barking really intensely…

"Hector! What are you making such a fuss about? Is there a human corpse lying around the house or something?" Sakurako-san scolds him as she gets out of the car.

When I open the door, it's Gran, not Hector, who comes out of the living room.

"…What is it, Ume…"

"Y-young lady…"

This feels very off. As soon as she sees Sakurako-san in the entrance, Gran falls to her knees.

"Ume?"

Then I notice them. The black business shoes by the door. I recognize those shoes. The same, exact ones **.**

"…Huh?"

Gran begins to sob. "Young lady… why… why did this happen…"

"Ume? What are you talking about?"

It was at that moment. At almost the same time, three unfamiliar men come out of the living room. They're all well dressed and fit, but of different ages. At the same moment, I sense people moving outside the front door and instantly realize we're surrounded.

"S… Sakurako-san?!"

"Who are all of you?" Sakurako-san asks with a grim expression.

The middle aged man in the middle of the trio takes a step forward. "You're Sakurako Kujou-san, I assume?"

“…Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Gotou, from the Central Asahikawa Police Station. I’m here to discuss the murder of Osamu Okuhara.”

Part 3

Chaos can really come at you suddenly. The unusual smoothly slides over the ordinary and destroys what you considered to be normal. The police mercilessly take Sakurako-san to the police station. She is asked to go voluntarily as a key witness in the case. She stays extremely calm the whole time. She asks me to contact Shouko-san and Ariwara-san immediately, as well as a lawyer. She doesn’t resist.

When Gran breaks down in tears in the entrance, Sakurako-san tells her, “don’t worry. I didn’t do anything.”

“I have no recollection of having done this. I’ll be released soon. Boy, I’m sorry, but please take care of Ume.”

I can hear Gran crying, and Hector barking from the back of the house. I’m anxious because of all of the unusual sounds, but I nod at her as I desperately try to hold back my own tears. Sakurako-san’s expression and tone of voice are exactly the same as always. I think the fact that she doesn’t look worried at all is proof of her innocence. No, I know that for sure. Sakurako-san would never kill someone. I’m sure of it.

After Sakurako-san is taken away, I’m left with Gran, who is still crying on the floor.

“I always… I always thought this day would come,” she chokes out, curling up her tiny body. “What can I do to apologize to her late parents?”

“You don’t need to apologize. Sakurako-san would never kill someone. I’m certain of it,” I say as I rub her little back.

She clings to me and sobs even harder. All I can think of is how tiny she is. So helpless, frail, and light. I don’t normally notice it because she’s so capable, but I’m reminded again about Gran’s old age. I want to cry, too, but I can’t.

“At any rate, let’s contact Ariwara-san and the others.”

I don’t have my cell phone right now. Without a phone and an address book, I can’t contact anyone.

Poor Hector was locked up in a large crate that’s normally in the storage room. He doesn’t like the crate very much since it’s only used when guests are over or he’s going to the vet. Being trapped and sensing the unusual atmosphere, white foam has started to form at the corners of his black mouth while he lets out the occasional whimper. He’ll be noisy during the phone calls. While Gran gets the address book, I let him out of the crate. He runs at full speed to the entrance.

“Hector…”

I follow him, and find him sitting well behaved on the cold, stone pavement as if he was told to “stay.”

“…You should wait somewhere warm. It’s cold there,”

I call out to him, but he just weakly whimpers back. It’s like he regrets not being able to protect Sakurako-san.

“It’ll be okay.”

I wrap my arms around him and hug his neck. The sound of his heart beating faster than mine encourages me.

Even on a day like this, Ariwara-san is unreachable, and Shouko-san doesn’t pick up, either. I left a voicemail, so I’m sure they’ll get in touch later. Other than that… After thinking a bit, I contact her uncle. Maybe it’s because it’s late, but I can’t get through to him, either.

I don’t have any email addresses memorized, and I don’t even have my cell phone. I want to borrow Sakurako-san’s computer, but I don’t know the password to log in. I’m surprised by how reliant I am on my phone. It must be hard not having one.

I don’t really trust him, but it’s unavoidable that I have to contact Aoba-san. He’s surprised, and says he’ll do everything he can.

“You should also contact her father before he hears about it on the news.”

“Huh?”

When he says “father,” I have no idea who he’s talking about at first.

“Oh… I see, so Sakurako-san’s father is still alive.”

I don’t feel his presence at all in her daily life, so I figured he’d passed away.

“He has a new family now, and they hardly talk to each other, but I still feel like we should let him know when something like this happens…”

That’s definitely true. But we still have no idea what’s going to happen from here on. All I know for certain is that Sakurako-san is innocent. Aoba-san warns me not to get too involved with all of this. He doesn’t have much authority over the ghosts, and while he’s not sure if they’re involved or not, it’s best to leave Sakurako-san’s affairs to the adults in her life. And… There’s no guarantee that Sakurako-san didn’t commit murder.

I’m a stranger to the Kujou family, and I’m still a minor. They should be the ones to deal with their own problems. There’s no need for me to stick my nose in it. I can’t exactly argue back, especially what he said about how adults should handle it. It’s not that I don’t realize that I’m an outsider. I’m just sad that I’m not part of the family.

“…”

In the end, Aoba-san and Shitara-sensei say that they’ll contact Sakurako-san’s father, then tell me to go home.

I’m sure that Ariwara-san and Shouko-san will do something once they get my voicemail. My mom must be worried, too… It’s probably best for me to go home and wait for someone to contact me. While I know that’s what’s best, I still feel guilty. It hurts more than anything that I have to leave Gran crying all alone. While she listens to my conversation with Aoba-san, she seems to realize the situation I’m in.

As soon as I end the call, she says, “I’ll be fine on my own.”

Her eyes are all red from crying, but she’s still trying to swallow her anxiety and act brave. I suddenly realize that the reason I can stay so calm right now is because I’m not “family.” I mean… If I were really Sakurako-san’s little brother, I’d be more distraught— No, that’s not true. I’m sure he could handle it more calmly than I can. But that’s not reality. He isn’t here. There’s no point in thinking “what if.” I just have

to do the best I can, even if we are strangers. Sakurako-san taught me before that water is thicker than blood.

Since it's getting late, I ask my Nagayama grandpa to take me home. He readily agrees.

"Ariwara-san and the others should be here soon. I'm heading home for now, but I'm going to find out what's happening. I'm sure you'll be anxious tonight. Hector will be, too. Please call my house if you need anything at all, no matter what time it is," I tell Gran.

I also tell Hector to stay with her. I don't know how much Hector understood, but the look in his dark eyes seems to say, "okay!" He walks over to Gran.

The reason I don't want her to be alone isn't just because I feel sorry for her, but also because I don't want her to do anything rash. I get into my grandpa's car once he comes to pick me up. I've been in a lot of different cars today.

"Actually… Something really terrible happened."

His eyes widen in surprise. He says, "yeah, that's right." after he stays silent for a moment when I tell him it's a false charge. "She may be a strange woman, but she's not the type to have malicious hidden desires. She's more straightforward. Besides, the head of the Kujou family is famous, but he has always been a good person. He's a bit of an oddball, though."

"Really?"

"He believed in never doubting another person. He even gave up his land to people he trusted, and he must have been tricked many times, but he still believed it was better to trust them. That's why everyone loves and trusts him," my grandpa says. "There must have been people who approached him to take advantage of him, though. Anyway, he's a man of conviction. When he decides on something, he sticks with it, no matter what other people say. I get the feeling that the young lady has the same kind of disposition as he does. It must cause problems for the people around her, though." He lets out a hearty laugh.

My chest feels tight.

"…I met Sakurako-san on my way to see you. Back then, my grandma had just died, and my brother moved away, so I suddenly felt

like I was all alone. I didn't know what to do with my future, and every day felt so cramped that it felt like time had stopped."

No, that's not it. Back then, I'm sure that time died for me.

"When I met Sakurako-san, I learned that time never stops. I learned that this 'unstoppable time' is finite, and people never know when or if they're going to die. That's why I have to live, and protect what matters."

At the time, I didn't realize how obvious it was. Still, while everyone seems to lose sight of it and forget about it, Sakurako-san will never forget. Beyond life, there is death. Beyond death, there is life again. She loves bones because she adores life. That's her foundation. The reason I keep needing to tell myself she'd never kill anyone is because of my own doubts and anxiety. I couldn't fully trust her.

"Right now, I'm certain I'm alive. I'm going to save her this time."

Now that I think about it, she has saved many lives. Now it's our turn to believe in and protect her.

Upon arriving home I try to get out of the car, but my grandpa grabs my head firmly with his large hand.

"I'll tell the rest of your grandpas about it, so let us know if you need anything."

"I will. Thanks."

"Don't be reckless. Going all out isn't the only way. It's the same with judo. You can't win by just hitting your opponent head-on."

"Got it."

"Alright. Go get 'em, Shoutarou."

"…Right." I nod firmly. He rubs my head roughly.

I'm grateful for the encouragement, and that my grandpa believes in the people I believe in. He's the one who raised me to be strong enough to believe in others

When I get home, my mom is surprised I haven't eaten anything, since she thought I would have had a whole Christmas feast. But to be honest, I'm not even hungry. Feelings of tension and impatience are pushing hard on my chest. She says she'll make something for me, but I tell her I don't need anything before retreating to my room with

the cordless telephone in hand. Fortunately, my contacts are saved to the cloud. As long as I have a computer, I can make phone calls. I start with Isozaki-sensei.

Either he's busy, or doesn't recognize the number because he doesn't pick up. That's okay. I leave a message thanking him for calling the ambulance, and saying that Sakurako-san was taken by the police. I intended to make my message concise, but when I think about how I'm calling Isozaki-sensei, even though he didn't pick up, tears start to well up in my eyes. He's such a good person, and always makes me feel secure, like I can rely on him if I'm ever in serious trouble. But today, I can't get a hold of him.

It can't be helped. Next up is my *favourite* . I pull out the business card, and type in the numbers with trembling hands.

"Please… Pick up…"

I've heard this ringtone countless times today. Please, just this once… Please…

"…Hello?" Just as I start to lose hope, I hear a questioning tone answer back.

"Oh! Yakuwa-san! It's me, Shoutarou!"

"Tatewaki-kun?! Thank goodness. I called you countless times."

"Oh… Well, actually… I broke my phone."

I can't bring myself to tell him that a criminal stole my phone and got away, so I make up a lie.

"A-anyway, why were you calling me?!"

"I… I got word from the Asahikawa branch."

"Was it… About Sakurako-san?"

"Yes."

"She was just taken away by the police."

"I see…"

The shock causes a chill to run down my spine, making me nauseated. I clear my throat.

"What's going on…?"

I don't even know who they think she murdered. Sakurako-san and I have been involved in a lot of murders.

"I just want to ask you one thing. Is she really innocent?"

“Of course she is. Sakurako-san is incapable of murder,” I say decisively.

“…”

Yakuwa-san stays silent for a moment. He knows how hard Sakurako-san worked to save Yoshimi-san’s life before.

“…I still don’t know everything, but I’m willing to share some information. Tell me what you know as compensation.”

“…Of course. I’ll tell you anything that I can.”

I hesitate briefly as Hanabusa crosses my mind. I don’t want to get Yakuwa-san into any more trouble, but I have a feeling he’ll learn about Hanabusa on his own eventually, anyway.

“A few hours ago, a man’s body was found in the trunk of a car that was in an accident in Kamuikotan.”

“What?”

“The victim’s driver’s license says he’s Osaka Okuhara, a 58 year old man. The cause of death was suffocation by strangulation. There’s marks indicating he was struck on the head that are consistent with a metal baseball bat found nearby. Fingerprints left in the car and on the bat match Kujou-san’s.”

“That’s—“

In other words, the victim is the fake culprit that was framed for the murder of Soutarou-kun and Yuzuki-chan…

“Kujou-san has been involved in incidents many times in the past. Because of that, her fingerprints were already registered in the police database.”

“But! Sakurako-san isn’t the one who used the metal bat— ah…”

I remember as soon as the words leave my mouth. It’s true, Sakurako-san touched the bat with her bare hands. When Sakurako-san took it from Yoshimi-san, she wasn’t wearing gloves.

“But… So that’s how?”

“A man who was visiting haunted locations near the scene was injured in the tunnel and transported to the hospital. A woman at the scene matched Kujou-san’s description— were you there, too?”

“…Yes.”

How do I put this… it’s like… everything is moving in the wrong direction. My calling for the police ended up backfiring on Sakurako-

san.

“Please tell me everything that happened, Tatewaki-kun .”

“…”

Everything… This isn’t going to be easy. I don’t know what to say, how far to go, or even where to start.

“I can’t tell you everything… for now, at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“…You might not believe me, but you could be put in real danger. I also can’t be positive you’re on my side. So I can’t tell you all of it right now. I have to hurry to clear the false accusation against Sakurako-san… but once I get her back, I want you to hear everything, Yakuwa-san.”

“…”

I hear Yakuwa-san let out a short sigh through the receiver. I feel like he’s annoyed.

“Fortunately Sakurako-san’s fiancée is with the police, and her uncle used to work for the police as well. I’m sure they’ll settle everything well—“

“Perhaps, but I’m not very optimistic about Kujou-san’s current situation,” Yakuwa-san says coldly just as I’m about to say “she should be released on bail soon.”

“…Huh?”

“It’s as you’d expect when she’s intervened with so many cases. And above all, there’s her personality. It’ll be difficult for people to sympathize with her. I can see her provoking the wrath of the police. Besides—“

“Besides?”

“The person found the body…”

“Who was it?”

“A police officer at the scene who knows Kujou-san said that it’s likely she killed the man.”

“They did?! Who is this person?! That’s terrible! That’s a false testimony!”

The first person who comes to mind is that tanuki-like detective that we’ve run into a few times, but she’s had many other disputes with police officers. As Yakuwa-san said, she has a “certain

personality," for better or for worse. Unfortunately, I can't deny that there are probably people out there with a grudge against Sakurako-san that I don't know about. However, all my predictions turn out to be wrong. As soon as I hear the name, I almost drop the phone.

"What…? Y-you're joking, right? Please repeat it for me…"

"I wouldn't joke about this. He must be an acquaintance of Kujou-san's, then? The person who reported her to the police was Hiroki Utsumi-san."

Part 4

I have no idea what's going on anymore. It's hard enough to contact anyone without my phone, but it feels like someone's blocking me from getting in touch with anyone. Chiba-san's plot for revenge was a joke and full of holes, as was Yoshimi-san's plan to get the doll head. I should have just let her manipulate me. It was a messy plan that Sakurako-san was supposed to be appalled by, but it was actually a trick to get her arrested, wasn't it? Who? Why? How? I keep asking myself those questions, but I never get an answer. I try calling the Kujou house, but the line is busy . Gran must be talking to someone else.

There's not much for me to say about the incident, anyway. Yakuwa-san says that he'll keep investigating. I tell him everything I can. I tell him that I went to Kamuikotan with a friend, and we got into some "trouble." He's not satisfied with my explanation that's full of holes, but I can't tell him.

Time passes by mercilessly. It might be weird for me to call anyone this late at night… I'll wait for dawn instead. Before I go to bed, my worried mom makes me three big onigiri. Salty herring and tonkatsu dripping with sauce wrapped up into rice balls with Korean nori, and some simple salmon nigiri. My mom always makes her onigiri too big, so they fall apart when you try to eat them, but I love it, and eat it without complaint. Still, no matter how hard I try, I only manage to finish one of them.

It's going to be a long night, anyway. I spend the night in bed with the cordless phone without even changing into my pajamas. It's a tough night. I feel like I'm dreaming, but still awake at the centre of my mind.

After waking up I wash down the cold leftover onigiri with some tea. Fortunately since there was plastic wrap the rice didn't dry out, but since it was wrapped while it was still warm the condensation made the nori all sticky. I haven't really been liking crunchy seaweed lately, so this is delicious. I used to love the crunchy seaweed that convenience store onigiri were wrapped in, but not anymore. I think about why while I gulp down my meal— then I realize.

Oh, right. It's been ever since I saw Kiyomi-san's remains. I was so shocked from seeing her body, I puked up the crunchy seaweed and tuna onigiri I had just eaten. It's like that unpleasant feeling has remained at the back of my throat all this time, making me unconsciously avoid crunchy seaweed. Now I don't have to be scared of Kiyomi-san's beautiful corpse anymore.

"…"

I feel a dull pain in the back of my head, probably due to lack of sleep. I feel dazed, so I take a shower to wake me up. The electric tingling feeling when my toes hit the hot water makes me realize again how cold my body is. Even after thinking about it all night, there's nothing I can do. Are the ghosts laughing at me from somewhere? Is everything going according to someone's wishes? Is there really, truly nothing I can do about it? Frustration stabs into my chest. Seeing myself reflected in the mirror, unable to do a single thing, is miserable. Even though I decided that I'd protect Sakurako-san. No matter what I do—

"Oh, are you going out, Shoutarou?"

"Yeah."

"You're up early, considering it's the weekend."

"I'll be back soon, so don't worry. I'm just going to Secoma for a bit."

"Really?"

"…Yeah."

After I finish getting changed and head to the front door, my mom decides to talk to me. She looks suspicious. She'll probably hear about what happened from my grandpas soon, and then she might not let me go out on my own. I need to leave before that happens. I have

to lie to her. I might not- no, I probably won't be home anytime soon. There isn't much that I can do. But there's things that only I can do.

Soon after I pass Secoma, the police box comes into view. This is the path I walked down with Ii-chan before. I wonder what kind of expression Utsumi-san will have when he sees me, and when I tell him that the real culprit is me, not Sakurako-san. If he looks into it, he'll find out.

Since Isozaki-sensei called the police, they'll soon find out from him that I was at the scene. I was there when it all happened, and I saw what Yoshimi-san and the others did. I can explain what happened more accurately than anyone else. In other words, I can take part of the blame. I'm a minor, and I'm not guilty. I have a letter of appreciation that I got after helping Ii-chan. Utsumi-san said before that it would help me get a reduced sentence if I ever committed a crime. If I'm arrested, and Sakurako-san is released on bail, she can find the real culprit.

Yoshimi-san may or may not be directly involved, but she most likely knows something about it. Sakurako-san would never betray me. I'm positive that she'll help me. As the only person who believes in her, this is my only way I can fight back. I muster up all of my courage, and step inside the police box.

"Tatewaki!"

"Hm?"

"Idiot! Go home."

Someone behind me suddenly grabs my arm. When I turn around, I see Azechi wearing a black, lace poncho. Her black lips are held tightly together in anger.

"No… I can't. I have to go."

"Why can't you understand that doing things like this will only make the people around you even more miserable?!"

"But I—!"

"Just listen to me!'

I try to shake off her hand, but she hangs on forcefully. Her blue, painted nails dig into my arm.

"Azechi…"

"At least tell me what happened yesterday."

“Yesterday?”

“Me and Fluffymi were chasing you and Kujou-san around all day!”

“What? Why?!”

Azechi was with Utsumi-san? T-then…

“Then you’re the one who got Sakurako-san arrested?!”

“…That’s not true. But…” She hesitates for an instant.

“What does that mean?”

“Anyway, let’s talk first! The police aren’t going anywhere.”

“O-okay…”

Although I’m reluctant, she’s right that the situation isn’t going to change in such a short amount of time. I decide to follow Azechi-san. I don’t think she’d let me do anything else, anyway. If Azechi and Utsumi-san did something to Sakurako-san, I don’t think I’d be able to forgive them. I’d at least like to know why they did it, though.

After a short walk, we arrive at the McDonald’s near Twin Harp Bridge. The long, windy bridge is frigid. I think about turning back a few times, but seeing Azechi, who would normally be making a fuss over how cold it is, keep walking on with her lips pressed together, I have no choice but to follow.

I don’t have much of an appetite, but I can’t resist ordering something so I ask for a chicken fillet burger. Azechi has a pie. We take a seat with a bit of distance between us and the other customers.

“When I called you, it kept saying your phone was off,” Azechi says resentfully as soon as we sit down.

“My phone… I don’t have it with me right now. I lost it.”

“Really? At a time like this?”

“Yeah…”

I’d like nothing more than to have it right now.

“More importantly, why did you lie and hand over Sakurako-san to the police?”

“Lie…? I didn’t! We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“…What did you do, then?”

“We looked into Kujou-san’s little brother. She hates the person who killed him, and wants to get revenge.”

“You don’t understand her at all! She doesn’t want revenge anymore.”

“Is she a saint now? You’re always putting her on a pedestal.” Azechi accidentally lets her voice get too loud, so she pulls back with a frown.

“That’s not true, but anyway… I understand her best. She knows that getting revenge won’t bring Soutarou-kun back.”

“…”

I quickly take a sip of my oolong tea to regain my composure.

“I’ve heard a lot about Soutarou-kun and what happened back then… I wouldn’t be surprised if Kujou-san killed the perpetrator.”

“Azechi, you can only say that because you don’t understand Sakurako-san at all. Utsumi-san, too! You don’t believe in her!”

Azechi and Utsumi-san don’t trust Sakurako-san at all. I truly thought that Utsumi-san had faith in her.

“Quit blaming Utsumi-san! Not everyone worships her like you do! She isn’t normal. Like you’ve said, she isn’t easily swayed by emotions, but she’s also capable of killing someone if she steps over the line!”

“I don’t worship her!”

“Then what do you call what you’re doing?! Do you love her, then? Besides, you don’t actually trust her, which is why you’re with her all the time, isn’t it?!”

“…”

I can’t refute her point because it’s true. No, it’s different now. I saw Sakurako-san calmly admonish Chiba-san. I believe that she’s at least a little more composed than she used to be, probably. But what about before? I think I used to be scared all the time. I was always worried that she’d cross the line one day. Azechi is right. I’m the one who never fully trusted Sakurako-san.

Seeing me suddenly go silent, Azechi looks like she’s about to cry. She turns away from me to look outside. The sky is grey this morning. The sunlight is weak, since it’s winter. Before I know it, the sun comes out and projects shadows from the trees onto the glittering snow. Why do we have to be talking about something so painful on a day like this?

“…The weather is clearing up.”

“What? Oh, yeah.”

Azechi-san suddenly speaks after we’ve been silent for a while. She must have been thinking the same thing as me.

“My Alexa told me it’s going to be nice and warm today. It’ll be like spring weather,” Azechi-san says with a sigh, as if she’s trying to start fresh.

“We spent the whole day yesterday chasing after you and Kujou-san. Me, Fluffy, and Yamaji-san.”

“…Huh? Who?”

“Yamaji-san. He’s a former police officer… You’re not gonna say you don’t know him, are you?”

“No, I know him, but… But why?”

There’s no way I wouldn’t know him. I saw him yesterday. Before Sakurako-san was arrested. I suddenly feel a chill run down my spine. When he came to pick up Sakurako-san and I, he didn’t say one word about Azechi and Utsumi-san.

“Yamaji-san has always worried that Sakurako-san would go too far, and that you’d help her.”

“…And then?”

“So we searched for you two, and ended up at Asahiyama. Then we found Sakurako-san’s insect pin on the wall, so we headed to Kamuikotan.”

The insect pin was a message Sakurako-san left for Yamaji-san. I know we talked about that yesterday, but… for some reason, something feels off.

“Azechi, I’d like to hear your story in more detail.”

“I know, that’s why I’m here.”

Azechi grabs one of the fries off my tray, and nods strongly.

Part 5

As a girl born in Hokkaido, I’m no stranger to the cold, but it’s cold as hell in Asahikawa. You don’t notice it as much during the day, but as soon as the sun sets it cuts deep.

“It’s cooold!”

Kamuikotan is exposed to the wind, so it gets mercilessly cold. I sigh, wondering why I have to be at a ghost hotspot right now. A couple rushes out of their car as soon as they see us. They must have been trying to get up to something shady in this abandoned parking lot. I can't get in contact with Shoutarou, as usual. I'm starting to get annoyed that I've gotten wrapped up in this crazy situation.

"Blood… And it's still fresh," Yamaji-san says in a serious tone.

I have no choice but to take this seriously, too.

"It's a rental car. The windshield is all smashed up," Utsumi-san mumbles.

"How do you know?"

"The license plate. It has 're' it."

"You're right, it does."

The hiragana written on the plate is "re."

"So re means it's a rental?"

"Not always. In all of Japan, 'wa' usually means it's a rental. In Hokkaido and Okinawa, 're' is also used."

"Oh, really?" I say as I watch Utsumi-san walk a circle around the car.

"…"

He suddenly stops at the back of the car.

"Fluffy?"

Utsumi-san puts on gloves, just like Kujou-san does. He reaches out for the car's back door. He suddenly slams the door open. The trunk is back here…

"Ugh...!"

Thud.

"Eep!" I accidentally let out a small scream.

At first, I thought it was a mannequin, but it's not. It's softer and heavier than that as it tumbles out onto the snow.

"Yamaji-san!" Utsumi-san shouts.

Yamaji-san, who went to check out the bridge, comes running back.

"Call an ambulance!" Utsumi-san calls as he starts performing a cardiac massage on that thing.

I'm sorry, but… The way that thing is so pale, with its eyes and mouth open in anguish, I don't think it's a good thing that it's "unconscious."

"…We're too late. He has no pulse, and he's cold." Yamaji-san shakes his head as he takes its pulse.

"So he… really is dead, then? Really?"

I could tell at a glance. Even though I already knew, I still ask my stupid question. But still, I don't want to believe it. There's a dead person lying right in front of me. And he fell out of the trunk of a car.

"...Who is he? And why?"

A middle aged man, a complete stranger. You could maybe even call him an old man. Probably around 60 years old. His yellow, crooked teeth in his open mouth, and his scalp showing through his grey hair probably make him look older than he is. His clothes are dirty and smell like sweat and ammonia. I cover my mouth with my coat sleeve and move away from the body a bit.

Utsumi-san and Yamaji-san don't seem to know who he is, and won't answer my questions. He doesn't look like someone Kujou-san would know, at least.

"Hey! I asked a question! Are you listening?!" I raise my voice, unable to bear the silence any longer.

The two of them look away from me, like they don't know how to reply. They don't look like they want to answer. I already know, though. There's only one thing that comes to mind.

"...So is it possible… that this man killed Kujou-san's little brother? And that old lady's grandchild…?" I manage to wring out the words after taking a deep breath. I just can't stand the silence and cold anymore.

Yamaji-san also lets out a breath.

"...I hate to have to think this, but… when there's a body in the trunk of a damaged rental car in the place we think she went with Tatewaki-kun … Can you call that anything other than a case?"

He's right. I don't know what their plan was, but Kujou-san owns her own car, so she must have had a reason for going out of her way to rent one. But…

"...I see… So she… got her revenge…"

Even though a life can never be brought back, she punished the person who stole her family, her precious little brother, from her. With the same suffering.

–I'm glad.

But I'm scared to say those words.

Snow is falling, piece by piece. It's not fluffy, downy snow. It's more like round beads. The three of us stand stock still around the body for a while. After a while, Yamaji-san moves first.

"I still can't get through to Shou-chan…"

"Should I report this?"

Yes, of course. That's only natural, but…

"...But then Kujou-san…"

Kujou-san will be arrested by the police. If you kill someone, you should have to pay for your crime. But the police failed to catch the man who murdered her little brother, so Kujou-san punished the culprit on her own. Can I really say she was wrong? If she gets arrested, what will Shoutarou and Gran do? And Yuriko loves her so much, too…

"Then… Does that mean you won't report it?" Yamaji-san asks, after I fall silent for a few moments.

"Huh? Ah… No, I didn't mean that…"

Of course I wouldn't do that, but still…

"I-if we left him like this, he'd get found eventually. I don't know how much of the evidence Kujou-san got rid of."

"So you plan to overlook it for now and not report it?"

"I don't know about overlooking it… But if we report Kujou-san, then Shoutarou will definitely be mad. And Shoutarou might be- no, he probably is helping her, so then won't he get arrested, too?"

We'd be directly responsible for making them criminals. I know I have to make the right decision, and ignoring this is wrong. But I'm scared to pick the right choice. I know it's selfish and egotistical. I know it's sneaky. Someone has died, so I can't just hide from it. Still, I'm scared and sad that Shoutarou is going to hate me.

“...I wanted to stop this,” Utsumi-san mutters as he stares blankly at the corpse.

“If we’d stopped them, this wouldn't have happened…” He groans.

There’s tears welling up in his eyes.

“Even if you know something is wrong, sometimes you just can’t stop yourself. Everyone has times where they can’t keep calm. People are quick to blame ‘self control,’ but everyone has a different capacity for what they can handle, and different things they’re good or bad at. Even if you’re good at something, you can still fail sometimes. That’s what human culture and civilization is all about, supporting each other. If you know your friend is going to do something bad, then if you really care about them, you have to stop them even if that means getting into a fight with them,” Utsumi-san says. He’s crying.

“That’s true, but… Fluffymi and I never thought that they would actually kill someone, right? We really believed that, to the bottom of our hearts… Anyway, there’s nothing we can do anymore.”

I don’t think Utsumi-san should feel guilty about this. I understand how he feels. We both truly believed that we could bring those two back from the brink if they ever got there.

“In any case, what should we do? Report this? Or dispose of the body ourselves?”

“...Huh?”

“There’s a legend that says any body that is dropped into the river in Kamuikotan never surfaces again. Either way, it’s cold enough in winter to slow down the decomposition, so it’ll take a while before it rots enough to float. The body might even get battered against the rocks, making it hard to tell the cause of death.”

It’s a horrifying proposition. It’s terrifying how he can say that so calmly, without any change in his expression. Especially coming from a former police officer.

“W-what are you saying? You mean you’re going to drop the body in the river?!”

“Y-yeah, you’re not being serious, are you, Yamaji-san…?”

Yamaji-san narrows his eyes at Utsumi-san and I.

“But… It’s better than leaving it here.”

Utsumi-san and I exchange glances. But that's… A serious crime, known as "abandonment of a corpse." The victim was a man who kidnapped and murdered a small child, and the killer is my close friend. Maybe Shoutarou only helped Kujou-san, since I know he'd never leave her on her own. Is it really so bad for two people to kill a man who might have gone on to commit more crimes without punishment? But in that case… I was too nervous to notice that my mouth is full of saliva, so I gulp it down.

"...Are you worried?" Yamaji-san asks with suspicion in his voice.

"O… Of course I'm worried!!"

"It's true that we'd be helping a murderer, but neither of you are new to killing people, are you?"

"What…?"

I gulp again. A chill runs through my body, and it's not from the winter cold.

"...I've looked into Kujou-san's past. It's rude of me, but I looked into the two of you, as well."

"I didn't kill them."

"But because of the pictures you sold online, one of the buyers lost his job, family, and life–"

"Stop!"

Don't say it. I'm begging you.

I heard the story much later. I had already transferred schools and started a new life in Asahikawa. I wanted to know how my old friends were doing, but I was scared of getting involved so I kept my distance. I was a minor, and a low ranking in my class. That front let me keep the position of the victim. I thought I was the only one getting hurt. It wasn't until I heard that one of our "clients" took his own life that I learned there was more to it than that.

"At the time… I didn't understand what I had done, and I shut my eyes because I didn't want to know. I've seriously reflected and I regret what I did. I'm trying to make amends."

Selling is selling, and buying is buying. I kept telling myself that I didn't do anything wrong, and that the people who were so desperate to buy those pictures were ridiculous. I'm not doing anything wrong,

other girls are doing it, I can't help it because of my friends– I was fooled by the shell made of those words that I didn't realize how soft and fragile the thing inside really was. I was selling my morals and dignity like they're cheap just because they can't be seen or felt, but they're things you need to protect in order to survive.

I didn't realize that I wasn't just hurting myself, I was hurting everyone around me. I don't think the people buying the pictures thought about that, either. It was nothing to me. I could do something forbidden on my phone as easily as playing a mobile game. It's easy to lose sight of the value of money and the hurdle of guilt when it's as simple as tossing a coin to a street performer.

"I think it's the lack of imagination and forethought for the consequences that leads to crime."

There's a reason why all the things society says are "bad" are thought of that way. That's why I want to be a police officer; to help prevent kids like me from committing crimes.

"So… So I won't be complicit in their crime, no matter how much I want to help them!"

–But, what about Utsumi-san?

"..."

I look at Utsumi-san, who's staying silent next to the body. He has a dark expression on his face that I've never seen before.

"Utsu– F-Fluffymi?"

Why isn't he saying anything? Why isn't he trying to defend them?

"...Why? Nothing should have turned up about me in a regular background check. Yamaji-san, what did you find out, and how?"

Utsumi-san is usually ridiculously cheerful, but now he looks serious with his head lowered.

"That's true. The hospital was trying to protect you, so it was a real struggle to investigate."

"...Hospital? What do you mean?"

I don't understand what they're talking about, so all I can do is look back and forth between them. My eyes meet with Yamaji-san's, and he smiles faintly.

“When he was in elementary school, he deliberately turned off the ventilator on his cousin, who had an incurable disease.”

“...What?”

“He wasn’t scared of death, since he knew it was coming for him anyway. He couldn’t bear the pain that was eating away at his body, so he begged every day for someone to kill him. Of course, nobody would grant his wish, so it caused a lot of heartache for the people around him.”

According to the hospital staff that Yamaji-san spoke with, that was a long time ago, and they don’t want it brought up again. Also, it was probably an accident. But back then, Utsumi went to visit his cousin, then waited for his aunt to go buy juice. When she came back, her son’s ventilator had stopped, and he was no longer breathing.

The mother didn’t blame Utsumi. She just apologized over and over while she cried. Regardless of the method, her son wasn’t suffering anymore. Utsumi-san was still young, too. Still, he was old enough to know right from wrong, and the value of life. The hospital and his relatives wanted to protect Utsumi, so they said that the cousin died from his illness.

“The informant said that Utsumi-san bore no responsibility for it, but if he hadn’t done anything wrong, there would be no reason for it to be a secret. No matter how much they tried to protect him, Utsumi-san assisted a suicide - essentially, he committed concentual homicide.”

Utsumi-san doesn’t confirm or deny any of what Yamaji-san says. A cold wind blows, but all he does is stare down at the corpse.

“You have already committed a crime in the past. You’re willing to get your hands dirty and lie if it means seeing your own sense of justice through. It’s in your nature. Even today, in fact, he didn’t hesitate to lie if necessary,” Yamaji-san says with a creepy smile, as if to say, “isn’t that right?”

Neither Utsumi-san, nor I can deny it.

“Sakurako Kujou had a legitimate reason to seek revenge, and in getting it would likely mean she’d prevent another crime from being committed. What will you do? Will you report her? Or will you hide the body to protect both her and Tatewaki?”

What is he saying? I know it's the wrong choice… but I want to protect Shoutarou just as much. I try to stay calm. I'm afraid they'll look down on me if I show how upset I am, but the truth is, I'm incredibly nervous. My throat feels dry.

"W-well you keep asking us questions, but what do you want to do, Handsome Old Guy? Or are you going to make us choose so you can put all the blame on us?!" I start to shout without meaning to.

"Quiet," Yamaji-san says with his index finger to his mouth. "I'm fine either way. I want to protect Kujou-san. I'm no longer a guardian of the law."

So he doesn't need to act like a police officer anymore? But what about Utsumi-san and I? I reflexively look at Utsumi-san. His head is down, so I can't see his expression.

"...What do we do, Fluffy?" Tears well up in my eyes as I squeeze out the words.

I don't know why at first, but then I realize : I'm scared. I'm right next to a dead body, talking about handing my friend over to the police or committing a crime "again". And this time it's of my own volition. I'm scared of it all. No matter which option I choose. The North wind claws at the tears falling from my eyes. It makes my cheeks sting. I sniffle. Utsumi-san lifts his head.

"Uu, Fluffy…"

Then I notice that he's also crying so hard that icicles are going to form from his nose.

"W-Well I don't want to call the police on them, they're my friends."

"I see. Then…" Yamaji-san says as he reaches for the corpse's arm.

But Utsumi-san grabs Yamaji-san's wrist tightly to stop him.

"No, that's wrong, too."

"Then–"

"I like Kujou-san. I love Shou-chan and Ume-san, too. I even like that house that's full of bones… But we can't do this, after all."

Utsumi-san pushes Yamaji-san's hand away and tells the two of us to stand back to "preserve the integrity of the crime scene".

“People aren’t alone. We have family, relatives, lovers, and friends. No matter how terrible a life you live, there’s at least one person who cares and worries for you. No matter how sad you are, if you exact revenge, the cycle of sadness will never end. It doesn’t matter who it is… Even if it’s Kujou-san,” Utsumi-san says, and takes his phone out of his pocket. “...I’ll report it.”

He looks at us for a final confirmation. I try to say, “it’s okay,” but all that comes out is a pathetic sob. Utsumi-san looks like he’s about to cry again, but if we let him make the decision now, he’ll end up being painted as the bad guy. I help him hold the phone up, showing that we’re in this together. I’ll take responsibility, too.

“Hey, Goth-chan.”

“Yeah?”

“No matter what happens, stay friends with them and support them, okay?”

“Yeah.”

I already know that. It’s a given. Still, we chose the law over them by our own free will. In return, I’ll never betray those two, no matter what. I’ll protect them, even from the balance of Themis’ scale.

Part 6

After that, the case develops quickly. They already confirmed that Sakurako-san was at the scene, and they soon found the murder weapon nearby with her fingerprints on it. Being her usual self, Sakurako-san has caused endless headaches for the police before this. It’s easy to imagine that people remember her from past cases, and already thought she was suspicious to begin with. Apparently Azechi and Utsumi-san already told the police that I’d probably try to take the blame instead. That’s the whole situation as of this morning.

Then, Azechi tells me everything that happened yesterday. To be honest, I’m both sad and happy for their kindness, but I can’t forgive them for reporting Sakurako-san.

“Sakurako-san really isn’t the culprit. The person who hit him was Yuzuki Chiba-san’s older brother, who is hospitalized right now.”

“Like the Yuzuki-chan who fell off a bridge…?” Azechi tightly knits her brow.

“A reporter I know told me that the body you found had been strangled while unconscious, probably by Yoshimi-san. She killed him, then disappeared.”

“Yoshimi?”

From there, I give a brief summary of Kiyomi-san and Yoshimi-san’s story. I have to fake it a bit to avoid telling her about Hanabusa, but Azechi seems to believe me.

“Anyway, I think we have to talk to her first.”

“Right. The quickest way to get Kujou-san released is to turn over the real culprit to the police, right?” Azechi says, still sniffling a bit.

But–

“...However, she has been lied to and treated with violence, too. They were both in an extremely agitated state, so… it’s possible she killed him in self-defence.”

Sakurako-san is my top priority, of course. But… I can’t bring myself to hate Yoshimi-san, and I don’t think the fake culprit, Osamu Okuhara, is harmless. Azechi scowls at me for my hesitation.

“Isn't that all the more reason we should leave it to the court? If it isn’t properly ruled as self-defence, won’t she have to live in fear of her crime being discovered for the rest of her life? That doesn’t sound like a good life at all.”

“Oh…”

She’s right.

“Besides… If possible, I’d like her to turn herself in, rather than have her arrested. It’d help lighten her sentence.”

But it won’t be easy to find Yoshimi-san, listen to her story, and convince her to turn herself in. We stare at each other, not sure what to do next. The other thing that worries me is Yamaji-san. When I saw him yesterday he didn’t mention anything about Azechi and Utsumi-san, which makes me uneasy. Can I really trust him? The worry is starting to rear its head. It’s always hard to tell who’s on your side, and who’s doing what and where. They’re invisible “ghosts”. You can only trust people who you truly believe in, and fight with your own strength.

Even though Azechi said that I should be grateful that she’s spending a whole day of her precious winter break on something like

this, she accompanies me to search for Yoshimi-san. We jump on a bus and head to Yoshimi-san's house, but no one is there. She probably has no intention to come back here. I wonder if she got hit in the wrong spot and had to go to the hospital. I'm frustrated that I have no idea where she is.

"...What should we do, Tatewaki?"

"...The bones."

"Hm?"

"Where… Are the bones?"

This problem's bones. It's like Sakurako-san always says. Everything has "bones". The source, or truth behind it.

"What? Bones? Whose? In a grave or something?" Azechi responds to my sudden monologue.

"...A grave?"

"That would be normal, wouldn't it? Either that, Kujou-san's house, or a museum."

I suddenly make a connection.

"That's right, Yoshimi-san's sister's grave!"

"Do you… Know where it is?"

"Yeah. She died on my mom's property."

It's not that unusual for someone who is renting to die there, but Kiyomi-san left a lasting impression on my mom, even while she was still alive. Thinking back on it now, she was probably the type of person who charmed everyone she met. I was completely unaware of who she really was back then. Just like how Sakurako-san leaves a lasting bad impression with people, Kiyomi-san left a mark on peoples' hearts.

Although I called it a grave, her bones are actually stored in a charnel house at one of the shrines in the city. When we visit, we find fresh flowers. The incense holder still has fresh ashes that hold their shape, and the air smells of incense.

"It was probably Yoshimi-san. She was here."

"Couldn't it be another family member?"

"No… There shouldn't be anyone but Yoshimi-san."

Her parents, both her adoptive and biological mothers, and her fiance have all passed away. I ask the priest if anyone matching

Yoshimi-san's description had been here recently, and he says that someone who looked like her was just here. We missed each other. I should have realized that sooner.

"...What are the bones?"

"Huh? Calcium?"

"Not like that, I mean the bones of this case. Its true nature. The philosophy that drives her."

"I don't know…"

"She said that this isn't someone else's problem. Yoshimi-san and I are similar. She's my future self."

"She's completely different from you, Tatewaki."

"I thought so, too, but… I'm so grateful to you and all the other important people around me for supporting and guiding me. If it hadn't been for all of you, I don't know where I'd be now."

"Then… This Yoshimi person must be lonely."

Of course, I don't know if that's really true, but I get the feeling that she doesn't have anyone on her side to help or stop her. Someone who will accept everything about her. I don't know if she was truly happy living with her husband, but Sakurako-san and I took that away from her.

"To be honest… I don't think I understand anything about 'loneliness.' If someone is lonely, and they have to kill someone to stop it, what are they supposed to do?"

I'm lucky enough to be surrounded by kind friends, so I don't understand how Yoshimi-san feels.

"Sakurako-san always says that everything has bones. What bones motivate Yoshimi-san? What is she trying to do? As Sakurako-san said, if she was just in despair, she wouldn't have clung to the doll's head."

Azechi tilts her head slightly at the question I mumble.

"Maybe even she doesn't know, either. It's not like every single action a person takes has meaning behind it. Everyone has times where they didn't think things through, made a mistake, or tried not to think of something."

"...I see."

“There’s times where you hesitate, or can’t decide, and end up leaving things half finished.”

When you put it that way… Maybe she’s right.

“But… I still think there’s a driving force that motivates the way a person acts. A reason, a bone. Just like how you helped me today, Azechi.”

There was no need for her to go out of her way to get involved in all of this. Azechi furrows her brow and looks down thoughtfully.

“Why did… She come here?”

“Kiyomi-san was special to Yoshimi-san, even after she passed. Maybe she wanted some kind of answer.”

“An answer… But she couldn’t get one, right? Since the dead can’t talk.”

“Yeah, that’s what it boils down to.”

I wonder what kind of state Yoshimi-san’s mind is in. She seems like she’s an emotionally unstable person. She beat and killed a man to get the head of her sister’s doll back. She did end up getting the doll back, though. Is it joy, or anger? Grief, or peace? At the very least, I don’t think she’s enjoying it. And for some reason, the image of Yoshimi-san in my mind is always crying.

“...It’s always about her sister, so honestly, I don’t know Yoshimi-san very well.”

It’s like she’s empty, like a puppet. When I’m with Sakurako-san I get a little scared, thinking that I might be like that, too.

“I guess it’s an extreme case of codependency. How scary. I hope she doesn’t commit suicide, or anything.”

“...”

“After all… there’s a chance they might meet in Heaven, right?”

“Given the situation, Kiyomi-san might have gone to hell, but–”

What if the “Kiyomi-san” that I’ve heard about and the “Kiyomi-san” she knows are different…

“But then… why would she go to all the trouble of getting the head?”

“I don’t know. But isn’t it kind of self-destructive to leave the body sitting out where anyone could see it? The police wouldn’t necessarily

have suspected Kujou-san, and there's the risk of Kujou-san telling them about Yoshimi-san."

"...You're right, I do think her method of disposing of the body was sloppy. It's like she didn't care if it was found."

"Right?" Azechi nods.

"If she planned on getting away alive, she would have been more careful. Surely she would have left town that day. She wouldn't leisurely visit her sister's grave the next day when she could get arrested."

That's what I thought, too. Of course the ghosts might be guiding her and ensuring her safety, but it feels like they don't trust her that much, or don't have very high expectations of her. She's someone that can just be used and discarded… She isn't a butterfly. The butterflies I've seen so far have had some kind of "strength". A darkness, or a coldness. I don't think she has that kind of strength.

"So if she were going to commit suicide, where and how would she do it…"

For both Yoshimi-san's and Sakurako-san's sake, this has to be stopped.

" There's lots of different methods if you look for them. I don't know about all of that."

"But they're not all viable. Last time she tried to die by gas, so I don't think she'll choose something so painful and hard on her body this time."

"..." Azechi suddenly falls silent.

"...Azechi?"

"You know, the WHO has guidelines for reporting on suicides. The report should not glorify the location, method, or nature of the suicide. The reason being that it may encourage other people to commit suicide." Azechi seems a little bit hesitant. She speaks in a hushed tone, choosing her words carefully. "You hear stories about girls panicking in groups, then hyperventilating and fainting, right? It's not true for every case, but it's because most girls tend to be more empathetic and socially inclined."

"So you're saying that emotions are contagious?"

“Yeah,” she nods. “It’s more like identifying with each other, I think. It’s not uncommon for girls my age to have matching accessories, similar clothes, or the same hairstyle. The impulse can be stronger or weaker depending on the person, but I think girls have the desire to become one with the people we care about.”

“...”

Azechi places her hand over her heart, and speaks as if she’s enduring pain.

“I don’t know anything about this Yoshimi person, but I feel like she has a connection. So… That’s why I think she would choose to die the same way.”

“You mean… She would choose to die the same way as Kiyomi-san?”

“It’s still just a ‘maybe,’ though. You don’t have to take me seriously, but I think it’s possible that she’d think that way…”

Azechi suddenly looks embarrassed, and starts backtracking on what she said.

“No, I kind of understand what you’re saying, Azechi.”

I get a sense of impending danger with Yoshimi-san, like she has no sense of self.

“When I met Yoshimi-san again after all this time, she was completely different. She didn’t have the same hairstyle, but her clothes and demeanor reminded me of Kiyomi-san. She even had the same air freshener in her entrance, I think…”

I didn’t get the feeling that she was imitating Kiyomi-san because she liked her, but because she wanted to *become* her.

“She’s deciding what to do with her final moments. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a ritual, she would probably want to make them special.”

“Then… The botanical garden.”

“Huh?”

“The botanical garden. Kiyomi-san died after taking the poison she took from there.”

Part 7

Azechi is usually a little clumsy, but she’s the best at using the internet out of anyone I know. Because of her mistakes in the past,

she developed reliable skills. When I say that I'm going to the botanical garden today, she takes out her phone and suggests looking up their hours online first.

"They're closed over the winter holiday for renovations. What are you going to do?"

"Huh?"

"Good thing we checked. What are you gonna do now? I don't think Yoshimi will be there, given the situation."

"...Belladonna," I murmur without thinking.

"Huh?" Azechi asks, looking strangely happy. It has a completely different intonation from the first "huh," this one is much more bouncy.

"The poison Kiyomi-san took has the same effect as belladonna."

"The witch's flower! Amazing. So like atropine, then."

Her eyes are sparkling more than I've ever seen before.

"Apparently she took capsules filled with the fruit of a Japanese flower that has the same effect as belladonna. I don't know much about poisons, though."

"It'd be a tropane alkaloid, which includes atropine. They're poisons that paralyze the parasympathetic nervous system. It's like the queen of poisons. Still, it isn't easy to get a hold of." Azechi looks down, deep in thought for a moment. "Hmm… Maybe if she were a medical professional, she could steal a drug. Even if she gets found out later, she'll be dead so she has nothing to be afraid of."

"Is there medicine with the same effect?"

"I feel like I've heard ophthalmologists use one? I'm pretty sure they have atropine based eye drops, or something like that. I don't know what the lethal dose would be, though."

We were walking toward a bus station without having a clear destination in mind, so we go into a cafe to hold a strategy meeting.

"Belladonna is one of the main ingredients in witch's ointment. Recipes found from the 16th century call for belladonna, hemlock, hensbane, and mandrake."

"Witch's ointment?"

"The 'witches' used it to make them able to fly."

"..."

A medicine that makes you fly…? Azechi is talking as if it's obvious while she looks at the menu, but… I'm slightly taken aback. She glares at me.

"What? Of course, people can't really fly. The 'witch's flower' belladonna contains atropine. 'Blood of Socrates,' hemlock, contained coniine. The 'witch's grass' hensbane contains scopolamine. The 'devil's candle' mandrakes contain hyoscyamine. All of those are hallucinogens."

"Ah, then it made people hallucinate that they were flying?"

"Exactly. Well, even if their bodies weren't flying, their minds were sure flying high."

"Ah…"

"So… Maybe rather than imitating her sister, she wants to meet her, even if it's a hallucination."

Even if it's in a dream- I can't finish that thought.

"Sakurako-san said that her choice to die by belladonna might have been a message, since in the language of flowers it means 'silence.'"

"Maybe it was 'curse you.'"

"Huh?"

"That's the other meaning for belladonna. The scientific name is *Atropa belladonna* . It was named after Atropos, the eldest of the Moirai who controlled fate in Greek mythology. She was in charge of ending peoples' lives. Either way, belladonna is strongly associated with the concept of death," Azechi says before sighing sadly.

"It must be painful to have someone you love die to send a message like that."

That day, Yoshimi-san was genuinely upset when she saw Kiyomi-san's body. She cried out, "why?" At the time, we thought that Yoshimi-san drove Kiyomi-san to suicide. But really, Yoshimi-san was in anguish because she didn't understand why her sister took her own life and left her behind.

I've been searching for a long, long time. Mornings, nights, alone, when I'm with someone, at random moments, I'm always thinking of you, Nee-san. I keep searching for a reason why you died. I don't know what you were thinking.

“Oh…”

Ah, that’s right, I remember.

“Yoshimi-san… in the car yesterday. She said she had been looking for something for a long, long time, and that there was a way to hear ‘her’ voice again.”

She was still lingering around, searching for answers. No matter how hard she searches, she won’t find them in this world. So, standing on the brink of death, she’s frantically trying to find something, anything. That thought suddenly comes to me.

“I wonder who’s living in Kiyomi-san’s room now…”

If she’s really planning to die the same way Kiyomi-san did, wouldn’t she do it there? I call my house using Azechi’s phone so I can ask my mom. After ringing for a minute, I get sent to voicemail. It doesn’t seem like she’s home. I decide to try her cell phone, but as I’m about to hang up the announcer saying “please leave a message” sticks in my mind.

A message… We thought Yoshimi-san was the reason Kiyomi-san committed suicide, which is why we thought *Scopolia japonica* was her message. But…

“Was that message Kiyomi-san left really meant for Yoshimi-san?”

Maybe there was someone else it was meant for.

“But there was no suicide note or anything, right? Did she leave anything else behind?”

“...Oh!”

Now that I think about it, there was one other thing. There was something that stood out in her room. I call my mom again. Since the call is coming from Azechi’s number, she doesn’t recognize it and sounds suspicious when she says, “hello?” after picking it up.

“Mom, it’s Shoutarou. Where are you?”

“That’s what I want to ask you! Where did you go? I just got home from shopping.”

“Really? Then I had something I wanted to ask you.”

“What?”

“Kiyomi-san… she committed suicide in one of your apartments before. Do you know who’s renting the room she was in now? Is it her

sister, Yoshimi-san, by any chance?”

“I want to say ‘there’s no way I can tell you that,’ but you’re right, it is Yoshimi-san. She paid the rent for the first couple of months since she thought the property would be deemed defective and it’s be hard to find a new tenant. It seems like her mother has passed away, too.”

Yoshimi-san decided to get married soon after. She put her parents’ place up for sale, and decided to use Kiyomi-san’s apartment as a storage space for a while. After 2-3 years, the mandatory period for telling the new occupants about the history of the apartment would be over. Even though the rent was at a slightly lower price, it was convenient for my mom to have Yoshimi-san renting the place for a few years.

I see, it’s just as I thought. I’m sure Yoshimi-san is in that apartment right now.

“Oh, and one more thing. I’d like you to send me a picture of the mint plant that Kiyomi-san was growing.”

To be exact, it’s the second generation of that mint plant. My mom took the seeds from it and sprouted them. It doesn’t taste very good so we don’t cook with it, but we sometimes put it in the bath during the summer to make it feel refreshing. After a few minutes, my mom sends the picture to Azechi’s phone.

“So? What do we do now?”

“I need to make one more call. This time, we have to call Sensei.”

“Which Sensei? Zakiiso?”

“Yeah.”

“Ugh…” She groans with a look of genuine disgust on her face.

Does she hate Isozaki-sensei that much?

When he realizes it’s me on the phone, he says, “I called your house over and over again,” in a sulky tone.

I feel bad, since my mom was shopping so nobody was there to pick up…

“I have a lot to tell you, but this one is urgent!”

“I have a lot to say to you as well…”

“I’ll call you back later! I really need you to tell me something first! It’s about plants!”

He was about to say something, but he goes quiet as soon as I mention plants.

“...Fine. Go ahead.”

He’ll do anything to talk about plants.

“I’m going to send you a picture of a mint plant, but can you tell me what variety it is? I’ve heard that there’s lots of different kinds.”

“Mint… It’s true that there are lots of varieties, and they can hybridize- or crossbreed readily, so it can be difficult to tell if it’s not distinctive. I might not be able to answer your question,” Isozaki-sensei says timidly.

Even knowing it might be difficult, I still send him the picture.

“Can you tell?”

“Umm… Oh, this is unusual. There’s been less of these recently.”

“So you know what it is?”

“Yes, I should be able to.”

Yay, as expected of Isozaki-sensei. I’m relieved.

“It looks like a hakka. The leaves are slender, and the petioles are longer.”

Hakka…?

“Huh? Aren’t mint and hakka different things?”

“Hakka is one kind of mint. It’s also called Japanese peppermint. Mint is a specialty in Kitami, but western varieties are more mainstream, so this one isn’t grown much. It has a strong camphor scent and a very bitter taste, so it isn’t suitable to use for food on its own.”

“Oh, so that’s why it was so bitter…” There’s a reason why it tasted so bad. “Oh! Um… do you know what it means in the language of flowers?”

“The language of flowers? Well mint means efficacy and virtue. Oh, but peppermint can mean–”

“--What?”

In an instant I have chills. Those words… I feel more confident now.

“...G-Got it. Thank you so much! I’ll call you back later!”

“Okay. Contact me as soon as you’re done with your urgent business. Right away. First thing,” Sensei says with a sigh, then hangs up before I can respond.

I hand Azechi her phone back. I head to the bus stop, but then I see a taxi. Luckily I have some extra money in my wallet that I got for christmas. I raise my hand to call it over without hesitation. I realize that this is my second time taking a taxi to Kiyomi-san’s apartment, A tension similar to fear is tightening the back of my throat. That’s right, I’m scared. I've lost Sakurako-san, and now I might find a corpse…

Part 8

I use Sakurako-san’s special move, ringing the intercom.

“Yoshimi-san! Please open the door! Yoshimi-san!”

There’s no other choice. I keep ringing the intercom over and over again. It would be for the best if the other people living here reported me.

“Please open up! Listen to me! Otherwise… I’ll call the police!”

Maybe there’s nobody in there, but somehow I can feel the presence of someone.

“I’ll call the police, or an ambulance! I’ll tell everyone that you’re trying to kill yourself!”

“Wait… Tatewaki, isn’t this going to have the opposite effect? Is this okay? What if she panics and kills herself?” Azechi lowers her voice and tugs on my coat sleeve.

“Ah… Yeah, but…”

But I can’t back down now. I considered asking my mom for the key to this apartment, but the chain that we cut last time has been replaced by a sturdy lever type of lock. We won’t be able to cut through it. Anyway, we have to get her out of there while she’s still alive. She’s definitely hiding in that room, listening to my voice. There’s still time. I renew my confidence and continue to shout.

“Please open up! Please! I know what it is! Kiyomi-san’s message!”

At that moment, Yoshimi-san’s heart seems to be moved. I hear a muffled thud from someone moving behind the door.

“Yoshimi-san. Are you okay with not knowing what her last message to you was?”

I hear another sound. She's right next to the door.

"...There's no way you could understand," I hear a faint voice say.

It's Yoshimi-san's voice. I knew I wasn't too late. I made it in time this time. My chest suddenly feels warm.

"N-No, but I'm sure you know how desperate I am, and how I'd do anything to get Sakurako-san back. I've been frantically searching for it all day today."

"I don't know…" She replies, only half convinced.

"You don't believe me? Okay, whatever. Let's just go, Tatewaki. There's no need to tell her. We can find another way to help Kujou-san," Azechi says.

I can still sense Yoshimi-san on the other side of the door.

"But–"

"It's pointless to waste any more time on this."

I was about to say we can't do that, but Azechi gives me a look like she's telling me to shut up. At the same moment I understand what Azechi means, there's a clattering noise from behind the door.

"...Wait," says a frail voice from the slightly open door. "Again… You're not lying? You aren't trying to trick me?"

"No." A tearful voice comes out.

I knew she was prepared to die and by no means in a good situation, but I didn't expect how pale and haggard she would look peeking through the crack in the door, like she's wasting away. Seeing her like this, I realize once again that this person has committed murder. Yoshimi-san is not strong.

"I'll tell you everything, but there's a price."

Even though I know that this is a cowardly thing to say. But still.

"If you want to hear it, I need you to tell everything - the whole truth - to the police."

"..."

"It's because of you that Sakurako-san was arrested. I can't tell you anything unless you promise to turn yourself in."

I hear Yoshimi-san's breath catch in her throat. Then, after a moment, a weak sigh.

"...That's fine. Knowing won't change anything now, though…"

“You think so?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it’s something you should know, and you’ll be glad you did.”

“...” Yoshimi-san doesn’t reply.

Rather than answer, she shuts the door. Azechi lets out a small sigh. There’s no helping it, we’ll have to think of a different approach. Just as we start to walk away, the door suddenly opens again. This time, the door guard has been removed.

“Yoshimi-san…”

I hear Azechi make a small gasp. Yoshimi-san is hurt terribly. The swollen skin on her cheek looks painful. Her lips are as puffy as a ripe persimmon, but she still smiles.

“...You promised, right? If you give me an answer that I’m not satisfied with, I’ll drink this poison right away. Then she’ll be labelled as a criminal for the rest of her life.”

“I understand. You make sure you prepare yourself.”

To die, or turn herself in. It’s a cruel decision. To help someone special to me, I have to plunge this pitiful woman into misery. But even if Sakurako-san wasn’t involved, my ego wouldn’t allow me to let her die. Some people say that suicide is a noble choice. I think that even if that’s true, death is the end of everything. But even so, I still want her to live, no matter what. I don’t want her to die.

“...Do you remember the day that Kiyomi-san died?”

“How could I forget? My life ended that day.”

The mark left from when we wrenched the door open still remains. She leans against the door and strokes the mark with her finger, probably unintentionally. She hardly looks at me when she speaks. The sweet scent of lavender wafts through the entrance. The scent reminds me of that day even more.

“The room was a complete mess. Books, clothes, and other items were thrown all over the floor.”

“...”

“But among everything, there was one thing that stood out because it was undamaged.”

“Was there…?”

“Yeah. Do you know what it was? Unlike the variegated ivy in the broken pot, the only thing left intact was…”

“...I don’t know.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. “It was mint. A Hakka mint plant. It was the one life left unharmed in this room.”

Kiyomi-san’s mint, with its strong smell and bitter taste. The poor plant had been abandoned, so my mom and I rescued it. I borrow Azechi’s phone to show Yoshimi-san a picture.

“This is the same pot it was in back then.”

“I remember it,” she says as she hands the phone back.

I really want my phone back, but now isn't the time. The mint is more important.

“I didn’t understand back then, but… I think she actually left it for you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why…?”

“At the time, both you and your mother said you were too shaken by losing Kiyomi-san, and didn’t have the energy to take care of the mint plant. My mom and I had just recently lost my grandma, so we understood how you felt - unable to face another life.”

My Nagayama grandma temporarily took in that grandma’s potted plants and looked after them. When the heart withers, the plants wither, too.

“But that was actually something extraordinary. It was such an important message that Kiyomi-san didn’t destroy it, even after she lost control of herself due to the poison.”

It’s not japanese belladonna. Kiyomi-san probably didn’t want to leave behind curses, or silence.

“The meaning behind that remaining mint, the Japanese peppermint, is ‘shake off your doubts,’ and also… ‘let’s be friends again.’”

“Huh…?”

“I still don’t understand why Kiyomi-san chose to die. It was too well planned to be impulsive. Maybe there was a reason she couldn’t tell anyone… or maybe it was an elaborate murder.”

Now that I know that Hanabusa's ghosts were involved and that Kiyomi-san was apparently on their side, I don't know what really happened anymore. It may not have been that she gave up on life, but rather that she had no option but to choose death.

"I think that while Kiyomi-san's death has certainly brought you sorrow, it also set you free from her."

Her younger sister adored her to the point of obsession. If Kiyomi-san really was one of those clever ghosts, she probably knew what would happen to Yoshimi-san after her death.

"I think she was thinking about you, but couldn't say it. If she said something, it could have put you in danger. So without a word, Kiyomi-san entrusted this mint with her feelings as she passed."

Large tears spill from Yoshimi-san's eyes.

"...We are not the puppets of the people who are important to us. We're human beings. So you have to think and live for yourself, and live well for Kiyomi-san's sake, too."

Yoshimi-san falls to the floor, breaking into a sob.

"That's why you need to turn yourself in. Then you can make amends, and start fresh."

I hate myself for hitting her with reality like that, but that's what I'm here for. I've done all this for Sakurako-san's sake. Averting my gaze from the bitter pain in my heart, I call the police.

Final bone: Cherry Blossom Funeral

Part 1

As if the demon possessing her had finally let her go, Yoshimi-san turned herself in to the police. She really was acting in self defense. She had no intention of killing him, and was actually considering taking him to the hospital. The fake culprit was the one who attacked her. He made her undo the restraints by saying his arms hurt, then violently tried to take the doll head away from Yoshimi-san while she tried to get away. Yoshimi-san desperately fought back, and before she knew it, the man was dead.

After Chiba-san regained consciousness in the hospital and he gave his testimony, Sakurako-san was quickly cleared of suspicion.

The message I sent to Shitara-sensei when Yoshimi-san abducted me played a role, apparently, as he took some steps in advance.

So, just as suddenly as she was taken away, Sakurako-san returned to the Kujo house the next day. Gran and Ariwara-san scolded her terribly, of course. Yoshimi-san returned my phone safely. I received a message from Yakuwa-san saying he's really glad he doesn't have to write an article about Sakurako-san.

It's been a few days now, and Sakurako-san and I have been invited back to Shouko-san's villa for a Christmas party. Apparently she's making a huge roast beef made from Asahi Takasago beef. There's so much umami in the red meat, every bite fills me with happiness. The soft, Suffolk and beef grilled skewers and fluffy Inca awakening potato fries with the skin still on are so amazing. The skewers have an irresistible, exotic aroma from the cumin, and the small potatoes are fried so they have a crispy skin with fluffy, sweet insides. These fries are incredible. The meat is amazing, too, of course. Although it isn't the star of the show, it's too good to just be considered a side dish. They're good both piping hot, and once they've cooled down a bit. Starting with baron and may queen, there's kitaakari, Andes red, shadow queen, touya, biruka, destroyer, etc… Hokkaido has so many delicious potatoes.

I'm so happy. So happy that it's making the food taste even better. Shouko-san apologizes for the living room being a bit messy since there's renovations going on, but I don't mind at all. The food is so good that I don't have time to mind.

"I've lived a pretty full life, but I never thought I'd be arrested ahahaha!" Sakurako-san says with a wide grin as she eats her strawberry tart made with plenty of sweet, fresh strawberries.

"It's nothing to laugh about! Do you have any idea how worried I was?!"

Sakurako-san's laughter is so insensitive that even Kougami, who is usually mild-mannered, is shouting.

I'm shocked, too. Everyone is reproaching her for it. Sakurako-san shouts as her strawberry tart gets confiscated. I wish they'd be at least a little bit grateful that we can all get together and enjoy a meal

again. I'm really glad, though it hurts my heart to think about Yoshimi-san.

"…It's thanks to you that Yoshimi turned herself in, Shoutarou," Sakurako-san says. "Thank you. You've become a great detective."

"It's only because Azechi and Sensei helped me."

"Really? I guess I should thank them, too."

Sakurako-san looks over at Isozaki-sensei. He just shrugs his shoulders.

"Anyway… There's something I need to talk to you about after we're done eating," Sensei says sternly, choosing his words carefully.

Shouko-san and Kougami look at each other, as if they've already planned this. The atmosphere feels weird.

"You want to talk to me?"

"Y… Yes, I have to show you something."

Shouko-san lets out a small sigh of relief. I guess she was worried about how to bring it up.

"What's gotten you so serious…?" Sakurako-san says with her brow furrowed.

Isozaki-sensei, Shouko-san, and Kougami all look at each other. They all have slightly serious expressions on their faces.

"Do you remember how we had a party here on the day when you got arrested? That day, we found something that's been weighing on our minds. You remember, Ryuusei, don't you?"

"He was a painter who was friends with your grandfather. It was through him that I got to know his brother, the head of the Toudou family."

"That's right. This house was Ryuusei's studio. Your aunt, Kaoruko-san, came here a lot," Shouko-san says, giving a brief explanation about Ryuusei and Kaoruko-san, who is also known as "Agiku-san".

"But that was a long time ago. Why bring them up now?" Sakurako-san asks suspiciously, frowning even more.

"…There's something I want you to see," Shouko-san continues with a grim expression.

She leads us to a basement-like place that was previously covered by the couch. The cold air gives me deja vu— oh, that's right.

The creaking of the stairs reminds me of the remains we found in Kouji-san's villa in Asahidake. Even though I know that can't possibly be the case, I briefly worry that there's a dead body down here. While it's not a corpse, the sight awaiting me at the bottom is just as horrifying.

"This is…"

I've been guided to a cold, quiet basement. The entire wall in front of me is covered in photos of Sakurako-san.

"I think this picture is recent." Kougami points at one of the photos.

Some are old, some are new. I'm half cut out of one of them. This is probably… from spring or summer this year.

"…Well considering my living room was bugged, a few pictures are to be expected," Sakurako-san snorts .

Shouko-san's eyes are wide with surprise. "Bugged?! The living room?! In your house?!"

"I don't say things that I wouldn't want overheard. I'd rather leave it as it is and pretend I don't notice so I don't make them wary." Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders like it's no big deal.

"That's not the problem!! It means someone was sneaking into your house!"

"That's true, I don't know when it was installed. It's possible one of my relatives set it up. It's too late to panic about it now," Sakurako-san says while laughing inconsiderately.

Shouko-san holds her forehead like she's getting a headache. Seeing how the pictures were obviously taken in secret makes me feel violently repulsed and angry.

"So what are we doing here? Just telling me I have some crazy stalker?"

"…Does anyone come to mind?" Kougami asks timidly.

"I don't know, but I'm not surprised. I'd be classified as beautiful if I kept quiet, if I do say so myself."

So she's aware that it's disappointing once she starts talking. I can't help but smile wryly.

"That's not all I wanted you to see. Remember this?" Shouko-san says, holding out a ring.

“It’s…”

“Do you remember this ring?”

I feel like I’ve seen it before, but I don’t know where. Sakurako-san softly steps closer and picks it up.

“…Ophelia.”

“What?”

“Ophelia in the bathtub. It’s Kouji’s father’s mistress’ ring.”

“Oh!”

Now I remember. It was the corpse that turned to grave wax in Kouji-san’s villa in Asahidake. This ring was in her hand.

“It opens that safe. It was probably on Kouji’s father’s finger.”

“…”

It’s the ring that Ophelia obtained by cutting off his corpse’s finger.

“I still don’t know much about her background. She had an affair with Kouji’s father, her family took her away, and that was it,” Shouko-san says with a grim expression while she leads us to the safe. “Her name was Sae Hakoishi. I think she met Kouji’s father while hiking, but I’m not sure.”

“What’s in the safe?”

“…That’s the problem… Go ahead and look.”

The safe is placed haphazardly on a cluttered pipe shelf. I hold the ring out to unlock it. When I see what’s inside, I’m truly shocked.

“Cash and… Precious metals?” Sakurako-san mutters.

It’s full of what are probably real rolls of banknotes (it’s my first time seeing them), gold ingots, what appear to be jewelry cases, and a pile of documents.

“That’s quite a bit.”

“Yes… This is probably supposed to be hidden money. Maybe Kouji’s father left it for her, or it was someone’s inheritance, or it was to fund something.”

“Or Hanabusa?” Sakurako-san narrows her eyes.

Shouko-san fills us in on what she, Isozaki-sensei, and Kougami found the other day. She also tells us about how Kouji-san dropped off the ring, and that the painter named Suzushiro might be Hanabusa.

“At the very least, this was one of their bases of operations. But why did she have that ring? It should have been with Kouji’s father. And about you,” Shouko-san says, looking down at Sakurako-san, who is kneeling in front of the safe. “This ‘Hanabusa’ seems to be obsessed with you, Saa-chan. And perhaps they’re obsessed with Agiku-san, your aunt Kaoruko-san, as well.”

“This is my aunt's hair, after all.”

Sakurako-san frowns slightly as she looks at the framed piece of black hair that’s displayed in the centre of the wall.

“…It’s true that I resemble her.”

“There’s so many things going on that it’s hard to tell what’s what. Let’s untangle the mysteries one by one. We might notice something that way. Like these photos.”

“Does anything come to mind when you look at them?” Isozaki-sensei, who has been listening to the conversation with a frown this whole time, asks as he takes a few steps back to see the whole wall. There’s a moment of silence.

“…Oh,”

“Hm,” Sakurako-san and I both make a noise at almost the same time.

“I see, it’s my age.”

“Right. They’re from when you were in late elementary school and middle school. There’s so many photos, but none from when you were younger. That means the photographer is probably someone you met during that time.”

“…In other words, around the time Soutarou went missing.”

Could that really be a coincidence? Or was that the trigger? Sakurako-san crosses her arms and glares at the picture, deep in thought.

“ Kujou-san ,” Isozaki-sensei says after a short sigh, looking like he’s resolved himself. “I don’t mean this as a compliment, but you really are an extraordinary woman. From what I’ve seen and heard about you from Shoutarou, I know there’s two sides to you. One that looks at crimes and the dead, and one that’s a scholar who looks at living things.”

“I must be pretty eccentric for a remarkable person like you to say that I’m extraordinary,” Sakurako-san replies jokingly. Isozaki-sensei’s brow furrows slightly.

“Listen, I’ve always thought you should stick with the latter. I think it’s a tragedy for humanity that you’ve mastered the study of bones, the foundation humans are built on, and your research papers are never published.”

“What? You’re exaggerating.” Sakurako-san looks suspicious as she forces a smile.

I agree, he’s claiming a lot. I don’t think Isozaki-sensei was joking, though.

“It’s not an exaggeration. There’s still mysteries about the human body. Even in the modern era, we’re even still discovering new organs,” Isozaki-sensei says, shaking his head slightly as he stares straight at Sakurako-san.

“You claim to have no interest in people, but you’re obsessed with crimes that are tainted by human greed. It’s because of your late younger brother, isn’t it?”

“…So what?” Sakurako-san looks away, trying to escape the conversation. It’s unusual for her.

Isozaki-sensei grabs her upper arm to keep her from avoiding him. “That’s enough.”

“…What is?”

“When you were still little, you were too weak and ignorant to reach an answer. You chose to pretend to be a forensic scientist rather than a biologist. It’s time to stop that.”

In the cold, dark, quiet basement, I hear someone gasp. It’s not Shouko-san, Kougami, or me. It’s Sakurako-san.

“It’s time for you to face the past again,” Sensei says in a quiet voice.

Sakurako-san looks at him defencelessly.

“…”

But I agree. I completely agree with what Isozaki-sensei said. We don’t know how everything overlaps, intersects, and tangles together. At the very least, it seems to have something to do with what

happened to Soutarou-kun. If we want to solve anything, we have to first unravel the mystery behind his disappearance.

"…His death was no accident. There's no doubt in my mind that someone killed him," Sakurako-san eventually mutters in a husky voice. "Of course, the bereaved family never wants to hate their relatives or themselves… I've been asking myself this for a long time. I keep asking myself if this discomfort I feel is because I'm the same as every other bereaved family member. Maybe I'm making up this 'culprit' so I don't feel guilty about being unable to save my brother."

Sakurako-san tightly clutches her chest. Right over her heart.

"But… I don't know if the car I saw back then is really connected to the incident… But I still believe that a third party was involved in his death," Sakurako-san asserts firmly.

Both Isozaki-sensei and I nod in agreement. Shouko-san and Kougami don't deny what she said.

"…It's strange," Sakurako-san says with a smile. "When I was a child, my uncle was the only person who believed me, no matter how many times I brought it up."

But things are different now. It's not just because she has grown up. It's because we all know what she's learned.

"I don't remember everything that happened back then. I was a child, and there were many things I didn't know yet, so I'll need Ume's help." Sakurako-san says that she'll return home and ask Gran about it.

"Alright. I'll look into Hakoishi-san, who had the ring. Right now all I know is their name and that they're from Akkeshi."

"Akkeshi…?"

"Is something wrong, Saa-chan?"

"…On the day Soutarou went missing… We were cooking oysters. A guest brought a bunch of fresh oysters as a gift." Sakurako-san murmurs that Gran was so busy preparing the oysters that she couldn't take Soutarou-kun on a walk.

"That's right… When you think of Akkeshi, you think of oysters." Kougami nods. She also has relatives from Eastern Hokkaido.

Hokkaido has lots of places with oysters, but the most famous oyster producing region is Akkeshi in Eastern Hokkaido. Akkeshi

oysters have a thick, rich flavour. They're so good that you could eat a whole tin of them and still want more.

"…Let's look into who the visitor was that day. Perhaps… there's a connection between them and Sae Hokoishi," I say.

"I'm grateful," Sakurako-san says.

It's a little embarrassing when she says it so formally, but at the same time, my chest is filled with anxiety. I can feel her resolve.

"If it weren't for you all, I probably would have given up on my brother at some point."

Her beautiful eyes suddenly start to water slightly. Maybe it's just my imagination. I mean… Does even Sakurako-san cry sometimes?

"It's always the ones left behind who struggle. No matter what I do, Soutarou will never come back, and neither will my mother and grandfather… but I still want to know the truth. I want to know the answer. Why did that boy die?"

Sakurako-san tightly clenches her fist, as if to show her determination.

"This time I will find out why Soutarou died."

Part 2

Shouko-san will return to Sapporo and investigate this "Sae Hakoishi" person. She says she'll talk to Kouji-san, too. Apparently she already asked someone to look into "Suzushiro".

Upon returning home, Sakurako-san casually grabs the wiretap and throws it in the trash. She calls Gran to the living room and quietly says, "tell me about the day that Soutarou died."

Gran's smile freezes.

"…Why are you asking about that now?"

"I thought it was a good opportunity."

"No… But…"

Gran looks like she's about to cry, and covers her face with her apron. Even now, it's painful for her to talk about Soutarou-kun. That's probably why Sakurako-san hasn't asked until now. I even feel like stopping her right now.

"We have to talk about it someday. If we keep going like this, you won't be able to rest peacefully in your grave, will you? You're the only

adult left who remembers that day well. When you pass, nobody will remember that day."

"…"

With a tear rolling down her cheek, Gran nods firmly, like she's decided to be brave.

I decide to make them some tea. The Kujou house is quieter than usual, and the kitchen is a little dark because of the snow. In the cold winter air, the kettle continues to make a trembling sound, even after I take it off the heat. I watch the white steam rise from the teapot. For some reason, I get the feeling that I'll never forget the few moments I spent in the kitchen today. This quiet kitchen will probably remain unchanged for a long time. I hope it never changes.

I take a bottle of milk from a farm in Kamuicho out of the fridge. There's a thin layer of cream on the edge. When I take the teapot, cups, and milk to the living room, Gran is slowly shaking her head.

"The guest was from Eastern Hokkaido, but… He... Had nothing to do with the young master's death."

"How can you say that for sure?"

"The police confirmed that he and the master had been together in his room. There was no time for him to do anything to the young master."

"B-but couldn't he have gone to the bathroom at some point? He could have slipped away and hid Soutarou-kun in the trunk of his car or something. He would have had to come by car if he wanted to deliver a bunch of oysters."

I ask as I pour tea into their cups. I get so engrossed in the conversation that I almost overfill the cups.

"That's true, but… the guest was parked right in front of the kitchen window. I would have seen him."

"Well… that's… True."

"But we can't deny the possibility that he had an accomplice."

Sakurako-san skillfully picks up the cup that I filled to the brim with tea without spilling any, but she sips from it noisily. Gran frowns at Sakurako-san, either for what she said, or for drinking the tea like that. I think it's probably the latter.

“But… I don’t think he was a suspicious person. I believe he was running a preschool in eastern Hokkaido.”

“Does the name ‘Sae Hakoishi’ sound familiar to you, then?”

“Hakoishi…?” Gran repeats.

Her tone sounds like she’s confirming that it’s the right name, rather than repeating an unfamiliar one.

“You know her?”

“I don’t know anyone named Sae, but I do know someone with the last name Hakoishi.”

“Was it the visitor’s name?”

“No, it’s Kei-san.”

“Kei-san?”

This is my first time hearing the name, however Sakurako-san seems familiar with it, like Gran.

“Right, Kei-san - Keiko Hakoishi. Do you remember,” Gran asks to confirm.

“How could I forget? I see… so that’s her surname…”

“Who is she?” I ask. They both have a grim expression.

“…My former servant. She resigned before Soutarou went missing.”

“Or rather, she was fired.”

“She was… fired?”

“Right… My mother said she’s never to step foot in this house again, and told her to leave. She was strict, but hardworking. Soutarou loved it when she read him picture books.”

Her tone sounds like she’s criticizing her mother, so Sakurako-san probably didn’t dislike this “Kei-san” woman. Picking up on the same thing, Gran lets out a short sigh.

“I just want to make one thing clear: the lady of the house was put in a very difficult position. Her older sister, Kaoruko-sama, was brilliant, beautiful, and even her slightly arrogant side made her charming. That wasn’t the case for the lady of the house,” Gran says, then changes her tone like she’s realized something. “It’s not that she was inferior in any way. Kaoruko-sama was just too extraordinary. Perhaps it’s because of that that the master was very fond of her. His wife was always working hard behind the scenes.”

Even though she was desperately trying to explain, I get the sense that Gran also preferred Kaoruko-san. I can sense it in her words.

“Eventually, he married the lady rather than Kaoruko-sama, and together they had the long-awaited young master Soutarou. It must have been a glorious moment for her. Although she never liked children much, she treasured her son.”

As soon as Soutarou-kun was born, Kei-san was hired as a “wet nurse.” Soutarou-kun’s mother fell ill and was bedridden for a while after giving birth, so Sakurako-san’s grandfather hired Kei-san. She was in her 40s, but looked older because of her grey hair. She was a strict, serious person who didn’t tolerate any nonsense.

“Despite her personality, she didn’t have a very good attitude about work. Even if she noticed that something needed to be done, she wouldn’t do it unless told to. When I asked her for help, she would often refuse, saying, ‘it’s not part of my job.’”

“Wasn’t it true that it wasn’t part of her job? She was only hired to look after the children.”

“That’s true, but…”

Gran recalls her memories with a slight pout, like she’s dissatisfied with it. But Sakurako-san denies it.

“Since she had her childcare qualifications, I’m sure she worked hard enough to earn her pay. However… She didn’t seem to get along with the lady of the house. She would often say that she didn’t like Kei-san,” Gran says.

Her employer didn’t like her, and she probably didn’t like her employer, either. She also refused to do anything outside of her working hours. Even when she saw Soutarou-kun playing on the piano, which he wasn’t allowed to do, she simply went home after her shift was over.

“Because of that, Soutarou fell and got a bump on his head. We’re lucky it wasn't a more serious injury. We were at fault, too, for taking our eyes off of him. I don’t think she should be blamed,” Sakurako-san says. She puts her cup down after finally getting the amount of tea down to a normal level. “But… I also think she should

have said something. The master and lady were very angry, so they fired Kei-san."

Back then, children were raised a little differently from how they are now, and the Kujou family in particular had its own parenting style that was different from other families. From what I've heard, Sakurako-san's mother wasn't directly involved in raising her children, and her "father" never seemed to be around. I think I understand why Sakurako-san says water is thicker than blood, and why she loves Gran like a family member. It's probably just the kind of family they are. The Kujou family is different from the kind of family I'm familiar with. And that's why Soutarou-kun was so extraordinarily loved by Sakurako-san.

"So when was Kei-san fired, then?"

"…"

Sakurako-san remains silent for a moment. Gran does, too.

"…About a month before Soutarou disappeared," Sakurako-san eventually says with a sigh.

"Without any new help hired, Ume was the only servant, so Soutarou was left without adult supervision even more often."

"Is there any connection between Kei-san and Sae-san?"

"I don't know. It's a rare surname, but it's not like they're the only ones. At most they're probably relatives that are basically unrelated."

"…Is that so?"

Sakurako-san seems set on denying it, but I'm not so sure.

"Honestly, I don't know how much of it is a coincidence. Doesn't it sometimes feel like everything was arranged for you?"

Kouji-san's father, at least, comes and goes from Asahikawa a lot and has a lot of properties, so Shouko-san says she's sure he has his fair share of not-so-nice stories. It's possible the money in the safe was made in one of those not-so-nice ways, and may even be connected to Hanabusa. And to Soutarou-kun, as well.

"Kouji's father painted as a hobby, and he met Sae in Asahikawa. In other words, it may have been a planned encounter, or he's an accomplice of Hanabusa."

"Right."

"…"

Sae Hakoishi and Kei Hakoishi, a painter named Suzushiro and Sakurako-san's aunt, Kaoruko, called Agiku. They're all still separate points, but when I think about Soutarou-kun and the Kujou family, I have a hunch that those points form a line. At that moment, like it was waiting for a lull in the conversation, the phone rings. It's Shouko-san. Since she's investigating Sae-san right now, I tell her that she might have a connection to a woman named Kei-san.

"Leaving that aside, there's something about Suzushiro."

"Did you find something out?"

"I don't know much yet, but I think Ume-san may have heard something about Ryuusei's involvement from Saa-chan's grandfather," Shouko-san says.

Sakurako-san puts the phone on speaker mode.

"Suzushiro was a disciple who stayed by Ryuusei's side until the end. He was still young at the time… He dropped out of the Tokyo University of the Arts, became an apprentice, and later took care of Ryuusei after he fell ill. Ryuusei had a stroke and became slightly paralyzed in the left half of his body."

"Have you heard anything?" Sakurako-san asks Gran.

She shakes her head, then says, "Now that I think about it… On the day of the young master's funeral, Ryuusei was there with a young man who was helping support his body…"

"Yeah, I remember seeing that man, too. Ryuusei died about 10 years ago now."

"Yes, it was 8 years ago, to be exact."

"8 years…" Sakurako-san repeats pensively.

"But I don't know much about what happened after that. It seems grandfather felt some guilt over entrusting Ryuusei's care to him, so he allowed him to use the house as he wished, if he wanted to be a painter."

Ryuusei had no spouse or children. He had no relatives to look after him when he got sick. His brother tried to hire helpers for him, but Ryuusei kicked them all out. Toudou was grateful that the young painter offered to take care of his younger brother.

"Ryuusei was very fond of Suzushiro. In the end, he left all of his inheritance to Suzushiro. He travelled around painting to avoid the

winter, then came back to Asahikawa from spring to fall."

"Oh really?" Sakurako-san asks. "Was he adopted? Or was it bequeathed?"

"What?"

"The inheritance. How was it left to him?"

"Oh…"

"What do you mean?"

"Normally, only close relatives can inherit an estate. If you want to leave your will to a complete stranger, you need to bequeath the property, which changes the taxes on it. Generally, adoption causes less disputes than bequeathing, though disputes do still happen," Sakurako-san explains.

"That's a good point," Shouko-san adds. "Either way, he couldn't accept it anonymously, so I'll look into it. If he was adopted, he'd be his grand uncle's son, so I might be able to trace him through the family registry," Shouko-san says with a lonely sigh. "If only your grandfather was in good health… I'd like to ask him directly what happened."

"There's no way around it. Let's stick to what we know best."

That's right. You can't turn back time, no matter how sad it makes you.

After hanging up the phone, Sakurako-san brings us back to the main topic.

"About Keiko Hakoishi… Ume, do you remember how they ended up hiring her?"

"No. All I can say is that it was the master's decision…"

Apparently Sakurako-san's mother used to hate children. Sakurako-san's grandfather originally left Sakurako-san's care to Gran at first, but decided her health was too poor to take care of Soutarou-kun. But her mother didn't seem to like Kei-san, so her grandfather probably decided to hire Kei-san unilaterally. Since she was supposed to work 5 days a week for an extended period of time, Gran says that he probably hired her through a personal acquaintance, rather than a babysitter service.

"And the guest was the man who runs the childcare company?"

"Yes, I remember it was something like that."

“Do you know what it was called?”

“No, I don’t…”

Gran can’t even remember if she had ever heard the name in the first place, let alone what it was. That’s right. Even though Gran is like family to me, she’s still an employee. There was no need to explain all the details about every guest they had over.

“Keiko Hakoishi should have been a qualified childcare worker. That should be obvious, given she was hired as a wet nurse, but something about this coincidence bothers me.”

There’s a connection between Sae Hakoishi and Keiko Hakoishi, and the childcare company manager that visited the Kujou family that day was probably also from Akkeshi.

“…In that case, the master of the household may have left you his contact information,” Gran says after thinking for a moment. Both of her hands are wrapped around her tea cup.

“Left it?”

“Yes. I was right to stop you when you tried to throw away everything that belonged to him a while ago.”

“That’s true. You’re always right, Ume.”

“It comes from years of experience. But…”

“But?”

“Master wasn’t very organized, and he didn’t like other people touching his belongings, so…”

“Ah, I get it,” Sakurako-san groans, looking troubled.

“Some of it was sorted, but all the address books and letters and things were tucked away together in several cardboard boxes.”

“Right…”

“But if he didn’t throw it away himself, we should be able to find the contact info in there. Alright, Boy, tomorrow you, Yuriko, and Blue Lips are coming here.”

Blue Lips…

“At least call her ‘Ranka’ please. It’s thanks to her that we found Yoshimi-san, right?”

“That was a lot of work. You have to show proper hospitality and gratitude,” Gran adds enthusiastically.

I feel bad about making them do this during their winter break, but I message them anyway. Both Kougami and Azechi readily agree. I once again realize that Sakurako-san is an amazing and fascinating person. We've all been saved at some point by Sakurako-san's hopelessly straightforward, unreserved words. Sometimes she makes me angry, and there's still parts of her I can't bring myself to like. There's times where I get sad, but she still gently closes the wounds that no one else could heal. So it's our turn next.

Part 3

"T… This is…"

The late master of the Kujou family was a very social person. He was very different from Sakurako-san, but they're both stubborn and hate cleaning their rooms. In other words, the number of cardboard boxes is a little higher than we expected.

"The young lady inherited her good memory from the late master. Even in this state, he knew where everything was."

It would have been better if they didn't have that in common. If he remembered everything, he should have remembered to throw things away!

"I should have cleaned this up at some point." Sakurako-san lets out a sigh as she stands in front of the pile of cardboard boxes.

"It's always you who gets fed up right away and wants to throw everything away, young lady," Gran says with a sigh. She wishes Kougami, Azechi, and I good luck before heading back downstairs to the kitchen. She's going to make onigiri and sandwiches for us to snack on while we work.

"Sorry to make you come here so early on your day off," Sakurako-san says, bowing her head. This is unusual for her.

"I know, right? You should be thanking me, Kujou-san ," Azechi says, puffing out her chest.

She's wearing her school jersey today, since she doesn't mind getting it dirty. When I asked why she chose her school jersey, she said that she doesn't have any bulky clothes like jerseys or sweatpants.

"Of course. Let me know if there's a bone you want."

“What?! A bone?! There’s no way I’d- Oh, wait. I want that one. The one that looks like it’s from a black magic ritual. The one with the deer antlers.”

“Really? Isn’t that a goat or a sheep?”

“The antlers are super cool.”

I get she has her reasons, but isn’t it weird to want it because of a ritual? What kind of ritual is she even planning to perform?

Sakurako-san, on the other hand, looks delighted. “Really?!” She says with a huge smile. “I have plenty of those, so I can even make a new one for you! You have good taste, Ranka.”

“That deer is way bigger than you think, Azechi.”

“Is it really?”

“With those impressive antlers, it must be male, right? The antlers alone are over 80cm long.”

“What?! For real?!”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll bring it over for you to try—“

“Geez! What are you guys even talking about! We’ll never find it at this rate!”

“We haven’t even started yet!” Kougami shouts, unable to watch any longer.

“Okay,” Sakurako-san and Azechi say meekly as they turn toward their cardboard boxes.

I take down the most conveniently placed box and hand it to Kougami, who is making a cute, smug noise. It’s pretty heavy, even though there’s just paper inside. My muscles are going to be sore tomorrow.

“You can just pick out the ones from Akkeshi.”

“Okay.”

After handing Sakurako-san and Azechi a box each, I start to work on one myself. There doesn’t seem to be any important mail or documents inside. Rather, it’s full of unimportant mail.

“It’s a preschool, right? Should I look it up online?” Azechi says as she flips her box upside down onto the floor.

“There’s a lot of daycare centres, including unlicensed ones. It might be gone now, too.”

“I guess I’ll start looking, then…”

In addition to the letters and photos, Sakurako-san's grandfather appears to have exchanged haiku with several people. There's lots of notes and postcards talking about the seasons, or current events. Not only are there letters he received, but there's also some letters that appear to be written by Sakurako-san's grandfather himself. It's all very chaotic.

"It'd be better to include the surrounding towns, like Nemuro and Kushiro," I say.

"Ughh," Azechi protests before reaching for another stack.

Even though the neighbouring towns are quite a distance away, citizens of Hokkaido are used to travelling long distances by car. A 1-2 hour drive is considered "short" or "nearby," so the travel barrier is pretty low. When my mom says she's "bored of the local Aeon" she'll casually go to the one in Nayoro, which is 80km away and takes 1.5 hours by car to get to.

This is such a hassle that I don't want to have to redo it if we don't find it the first time, so I'd like to be extra cautious. We all spread out our papers across the storage room and second floor hallway. Gran brings us some baked goods and a small table, and tells us not to work too hard.

"Your grandfather had a huge circle of friends."

"Travelling was one of Master's hobbies," Gran says nostalgically. "He was part of a haiku group called the Hanakaba Group, and placed great importance in human connections in both his work and his everyday life."

"Hmm, they're not that similar, then," Azechi says in response to Gran's proud statement.

"I don't hate travelling," Sakurako-san says, disheartened.

That's not what Azechi meant.

Not only does Gran provide us with tea cakes, bite sized onigiri, jam sandwiches, and egg sandwiches, but she also gives us a portable stove and regular tea breaks to keep us from freezing in the chilly hallway. We spend a few hours sorting out the boxes while regularly snacking and warming up.

"It *is* actually in here, isn't it?" Azechi asks.

“I think most of his documents were left behind… Here, please take a break,” Gran says, handing her a cup of hot chocolate topped with plenty of cream. She seems troubled by Azechi’s question.

There are still 2 untouched boxes left.

“It’s hard work, but… It’s kind of fun to see all the postcards and haiku,” Kougami says with a smile as she sips her hot chocolate.

“Oh, yeah. It really is.”

“…”

When I agree, Sakurako-san and Azechi both furrow their brows. I guess they don’t feel the same way.

“I’m not cut out for monotonous work…” Azechi says with a huge sigh.

She’s sitting cross legged, holding her hot chocolate in one hand and working through her box with the other. She’s the very picture of unmotivated.

“Hm!” Then, Azechi makes a small sound.

“Did you find it?”

The three of us all look at her.

“No, but this… Is it a photo of you two?” She says, handing us a photograph.

It’s a commemorative photo taken of Sakurako-san and Soutarou-kun in front of a merry-go -round.

“When you see her like this, Kujou-san looks like she has the face of a normal person.”

“I’ve always had a pretty face.”

“Not what I meant… You look like a big sister.”

In the picture, Sakurako-san is staring at the camera expressionlessly. She was probably told to just stay still, and did just that. Little Sourarou-kun is clinging to her, looking embarrassed. Sakurako-san has her arms around Soutarou-kun, like she’s protecting her little brother. It’s a touching photo that makes Kougami, Azechi, and I smile.

“Where was this taken?”

“Oh… Probably Asahiyama.”

“Asahiyama Zoo used to be an amusement park… Hey, is this person behind you a babysitter?” Azechi asks. She points at a woman

sitting a little further away, looking coldly at the children.

“Oh, yeah. She was…” Sakurako-san starts to say, then stops to confirm with Gran downstairs.

“Is it normal for someone to make a face like that while looking at two angelic kids?” Azechi says with a frown.

“You’re right… She could at least smile a bit,” Kougami nods.

“She was never a very friendly woman. She was always like that,” Gran says with a wry smile once she makes it up to the second floor.

Hector, who has been banned from the second floor for today, is barking downstairs.

“That being said, she wasn’t the kind of person who would abuse a child. She wasn’t very well liked… One time, I lost my gloves, and she warmed my hands up in her’s . She got angry and told my grandfather that other kids were bullying me at school.”

“You mean… You were bullied at school?” Azechi asks

This is my first time hearing about Sakurako-san in elementary school. This means someone hid her gloves from her back then.

“I was an exceptional student, but I wasn’t very well liked by my classmates. Like you, Ranka, I was probably a little too charming,” Sakurako-san says with a fearless grin.

Ranka looks a little embarrassed, but she puffs out her chest.

“Anyway, I don’t think she was a bad person. At least, she wasn’t to my brother and I. It’s hard to imagine that Kei-san would kidnap Soutarou…” Sakurako-san mutters.

She may have been fired unfairly, but I don’t think that would be enough to warrant kidnapping and murdering a young child. Of course, there’s no way for me to know how she felt, and people can become obsessive. Only the person themself can know how and where the flower of hatred will bloom. After hearing about how she protected Sakurako-san back then, I don’t think she was a bad person.

“It’s always possible that someone forced her to do it… Or she was tricked…” Kougami says with her head lowered and her voice low. There’s a hint of guilt in her voice, probably because of her own

experience with the ghosts. Her hesitation is completely blown away when she picks up a business card.

"Oh… Sakurako-san! This is it, isn't it?!"

"Let me see." Sakurako-san's expression stiffens for an instant.

I move to look closer. It's from an address in Akkeshi, and says "Hinode Preschool" with the name "Michihisa Kusaka" written on it.

"Ume, is this it?" Sakurako-san hands the business card to Gran.

"…Yes, Kusaka-sama… Now that I've seen it, it seems familiar." Gran nods with a stiff expression, as if she is nervous.

Sakurako-san looks the same. It's rare for her to need to take a deep breath to prepare herself.

"Let's make a call." Sakurako-san heads downstairs to the phone with the business card in hand.

I find myself holding my breath.

The call goes through without any issues. A woman with a cheerful voice answers. But when Sakurako-san asks to be put on with Kusaka-san, she says he's already passed away.

"Is there a woman named Keiko Hakoishi on your staff? She may be retired by now, since she took care of me when I was a child. I'd like to meet her and express my gratitude," Sakurako-san says, trying not to let her slight agitation show in her voice.

It's not like she's totally lying. As always, the circumstances justify the lie. We live in an age where we have to be careful with giving out personal information, but if someone said that to me, I wouldn't be able to turn them down. The woman on the other end of the line says that she's only been working there for 5 years, and while she hasn't heard of a Hakoishi-san, she'll look into it.

"The principal may know…"

We wait while she pulls out some old photo albums and waits for them to come take a look. The new principal seems to be out of their office for a bit right now. Apparently Michihisa Kusaka-san passed away over 10 years ago. I'm nervous for a moment, but it seems he died of an illness, rather than an accident, suicide, or anything that would suggest homicide. Kusaka-san's wife has taken over the preschool now.

“Yes, she did work here in the past,” the woman on the phone replies after a short while.

“…I see. When was that?”

“She retired… It looks like it was about 30 years ago.”

“Do you know where she is now?”

“That’s all I can tell you…”

Even if she did know, she’d probably be reluctant to give out someone’s contact information without their permission. The childcare worker kindly says that the principal might know something, and she will contact us if she does before hanging up the phone.

“…”

In the end, we don’t end up learning much. After all that effort, too. A sense of dissatisfaction lingers in the air around us.

“Oh well. We’ve confirmed that Kusaka, who was the visitor, and Keiko Hakoishi had some contact. On the day that Kusaka came to our house, Soutarou went missing.”

Kei-san definitely knew Kusaka-san, since she worked at his preschool. I still don’t know what that means, though.

“That day… Why did Kusaka come all the way from Akkeshi to my house?”

“I think he said that he had business to do nearby… But it was a long time ago, and I wasn’t told anything. However, I don’t think it was anything special or important,” Gran says.

The distance from Akkeshi to Asahikawa is over 300 km. That takes 5 hours by car. Would he have gone all that way without a good reason? We can’t rule out that he had other business to attend to, or that he was simply traveling for fun, but there’s something vaguely discomforting about it.

“Are you sure you can’t remember anything else? Like about the person who used to live across the street?” Azechi asks while she reaches for one of the jam sandwiches that Gran brought. The sandwich is a little dry now.

We finally head down to the living room, and see that Sakurako-san has finished her phone call. Hector is absolutely delighted, and attacks Sakurako-san as she sits down in her usual chair.

“Let’s see,” Sakurako-san replies. She seems slightly fed up with Hector licking her face. “Across the street… I really don’t remember anything.”

“They were a very serious family,” Gran says.

“I heard from one of the old ladies in the neighbourhood that their second son was bad news.” Azechi says that she heard rumours about him.

“I don’t think I’ve met their second son. What about you, Ume?”

“I don’t remember, either…”

“Is that just you, Sakurako-san? Or has anyone else in the family?”

“I don’t know. According to my grandfather, the family across the street was ‘intolerable,’ though. I don’t think we’ve ever interacted more than what’s necessary.”

If the head of the Kujou family, who seems to be sociable and kind, would say something like that about them, they must be pretty bad people.

“I think they believed in a religion I’d never heard of before, which might be why the family head was reluctant to get involved with them.”

“So you don’t know the story behind why?” I ask.

Sakurako-san and Gran look at each other.

“Well… I’ve heard rumours that he shouts at children. They said to be careful if you go near his house. I never actually saw him yelling, though, so I don’t think it was frequent enough to cause problems.”

“So… I imagine Soutarou-kun would be wary of someone like that.”

“That’s true. Children live in small worlds. They’re more wary than adults,” Sakurako-san says with a nod. “There must have been rumours going around at the kindergarten. I can’t imagine that he wouldn’t be wary, especially since he was so shy back then.” Sakurako-san says he wasn’t extremely shy, but he was cautious and uncomfortable in new places and with unfamiliar people.

“Um…” Kougami, who has been silent until now, timidly speaks up.

Hector mistakenly thinks that Kougami is talking to him, and jumps on her excitedly. “Please pet me here,” Hector seems to say as he presses his neck against her. She strokes him, then suddenly looks down.

“On the other hand, if he wasn’t wary, it probably wouldn’t be difficult. When I um… kidnapped Ii-chan… it wasn’t hard at all…”

Kougami temporarily cooperated with the ghosts to kidnap Ii-chan before.

“When we got near her house, I opened up the car door and called out to her. ‘Your mom is in trouble,’ I said to her. She looked surprised at first, but when she saw me, she trusted me and climbed right in. It only took a few seconds.”

“…”

We’re all silent. The only sound is Hector’s panting. At that moment, the snow and icicles on the terrace in the garden fall down. The sound startles Azechi and I.

“…So hypothetically, if it happened to be Kei-san who kidnapped him… He might have felt safe since he knew her, and gotten in the car,” Azechi says quickly, trying to hide her surprise.

“…I can’t deny that,” Sakurako-san says in a husky voice.

The phone rings, startling Azechi and I again.

Part 4

The call isn’t from the preschool in Akkeshi like I expected, but from Shouko-san.

“Did you learn anything?”

“Yes, you were right. There was probably an inheritance tax issue, so he adopted him. I heard that he doted on him like he was his own son or grandson, but that wasn’t the only reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“His real name was probably Kiyoshi Namekawa. Before he was adopted, his biological father was Seiichi Namekawa - The man who committed suicide with Agiku-san.”

This is the story that Shouko-san tells us, which she traced through the family register and heard about from art dealers who sold Ryuusei’s paintings, and his senior apprentices.

Kaoruko-san, or Agiku-san, once studied painting under Ryuusei. Her talent, personality, and beauty captivated both the other apprentices, and Ryuusei. Agiku-san didn't let others get close to her, but she was friendly with Ryuusei. She didn't generally pose as a model, and Ryuusei didn't paint many portraits, but there were a few nude paintings of her in his works. It's not known what their relationship was, but there were rumours that he took her wherever he went.

Gustave Moreau's Alexandrine, Klimt and Emilie, Rossetti and Jane Morris; painters are often accompanied by a woman who leads him to ruin. An art dealer that knew her well at the time said she was exactly that type of person. According to the other disciples, Ryuusei did favour Agiku-san, but he was fond of her the way one is fond of flowers and butterflies. By no means did they have a vulgar relationship. Also, her father was Ryuusei's friend and patron, and their relationship was good until the end.

However, their relationship got colder after Agiku-san's painting won an award. Ryuusei was jealous, since his career stagnated while she was young, beautiful, and bursting with talent. He soon distanced himself from her. Her father said that it was just a coincidence that her art was recognized, and that she had no future in art. As a result, Agiku-san had to give up her art career, and decided to get married so she could take over the family. Then, on the day of her engagement, she drowned herself in the river alongside Seiichi Namekawa, Ryuusei's most promising student.

"It sounds like Seiichi-san had always been in love with Agiku-san, but she never looked his way. He gave up on her and got married to a girl who had always supported him since they were kids," Shouko-san says with loathing.

I notice that Gran has left her seat. I've heard that Gran loved Kaoruko-san more than anyone. I suppose she couldn't stand to listen to this anymore. The unfortunate story of someone who was "a lot like Sakurako-san" makes my heart ache.

Was the double suicide with Seiichi-san supposed to be Agiku-san's form of revenge? Or was she just trying to escape? Fortunately, Seiichi-san survived, but his arms were paralyzed, so he could never

hold a paintbrush again. I'm not sure how his childhood friend reacted to his betrayal, but they still got married and soon had a child - Kiyoshi-san, or Suzushiro.

To survive, he drowned the woman he loved in the cold riverbed. He said that the long, black hair that was still in his hand was a curse placed on his son, who was born with congenital hypotrichosis. As his son grew day by day, Seiichi-san fell into the darkness of guilt. When his son was 4 years old, he plunged himself into a river again, and this time he wasn't saved. 3 months later, his wife took her own life as she couldn't overcome the grief, leaving their son on his own.

"After that, Suzushiro was left to a relative, and at some point decided to follow in his father's footsteps to become a painter. When Ryuusei heard that Suzushiro dropped out of the university he worked so hard to get into to go back to Hokkaido, he took him in. He must have had his reasons for doing so."

Perhaps he felt he needed to atone for how his narrow mindedness stole Agiku-san and Seiichi-san's futures, and took away Suzushiro's parents. Ryuusei kept Suzushiro close to him, and loved him more than anyone else. His students left one after another, Ryuusei fell ill, and eventually, it was just him and Suzushiro living together. It's not clear where Suzushiro was or what he was doing after Ryuusei's death, but he's said to have been in an accident a few years ago, and no one has seen him since.

"And Suzushiro… is Hanabusa?" Sakurako-san asks in a low voice.

"I don't know, but that's what Isozaki-kun said. Suzushiro is definitely giving me a creepy feeling, though. They say Da Vinci did the same thing. He dissected stray cats and sketched them," Shouko-san says.

I don't know whether it was bizarre curiosity-seeking or academic, and it looks like Sakurako-san is thinking the same.

"Also, his paintings always had butterflies as the subject, and he collected a lot of butterfly specimens as well."

"Still, it needs a finishing blow… Now, about Sae Hakoishi. Have you found anything out about her?"

“Ah, yes. About that… Suzushiro had an older sister, you see. Or rather, a cousin according to the family register. She’s the daughter of the family that adopted him. They were very close, it seems,” Shouko-san says. “This is just my guess, but some of the precious metals in the safe originally belonged to Ryuusei. Suzushiro had almost no money in his bank account. Ryuusei’s inheritance is missing, so he probably left it to his sister.”

So that explains the money in the underground safe. Kouji-san’s father visited Ryuusei’s atelier frequently, so naturally he knew Suzushiro - and probably his sister as well. The money that went missing after Suzushiro’s death may have been hidden by his sister and her affair partner. Kouji-san’s father, and his late lover.

“In other words, if Sae Hakoishi was Suzushiro’s cousin, then Keiko Hakoishi might be related to him, too. Considering their ages…. Kei-san would have been the ‘mother,’ in other words, the adoptive parent.” Sakurako-san narrows her eyes, and says that the reason she quit her job at the daycare 30 years ago was probably because she had to raise Suzushiro.

“So does that mean that Hanabusa - aka Suzushiro - was involved in Soutarou-kun’s murder after all?!” Kougami says, paler than usual.

“…” Sakurako-san stays silent, not answering right away.

Shouko-san says she’ll keep investigating before hanging up. Still, Sakurako-san remains silent.

“…Are you okay?” Azechi asks with a worried expression. She hands Sakurako-san a fresh cup of hot chocolate.

“I’m fine,” Sakurako-san replies as she accepts the cup. She doesn’t look fine.

“We should be heading home soon.”

Kougami and Azechi hurriedly leave the living room, like they’re trying to be considerate. When they leave, the room suddenly feels quiet, dark, and cold. Hector goes to see them off at the door, then comes over to me and nuzzles under my hand while wagging his bushy tail. He must be looking for someone else to pet him since they went home. I have no choice but to sit on the couch next to Sakurako-san’s chair.

“…This happened after Soutarou’s funeral.” Sakurako-san takes a sip of her drink to prepare herself, then starts to speak in a scratchy voice. “On the way back from the crematorium, I told a strange man how beautiful Soutarou’s bones were.”

She says he was a stranger, adds that he was a mild mannered man amongst the mourners.

“I forgot about it until now… At the time, I didn’t think I was saying anything strange.”

“Was that… Hanabusa?”

“I don’t know… But if the man who killed Soutarou attended the funeral, and spoke with me… That would be frustrating.”

“Sakurako-san…”

“I must have seemed quite strange to him…” Her raspy voice squeezing out the words “how frustrating” makes my chest ache.

“There was no helping it. That’s just who you are.”

“…What?”

“You loved Soutarou-kun so much that even his remains seemed beautiful to you. There’s nothing strange about that. For you, at least.”

To Sakurako-san, death is an extension of life. Her love for bones doesn’t come from a fascination with death, but a celebration of life. Still, she definitely would have seemed strange to an ordinary person. I wonder if that’s why Hanabusa became interested in Sakurako-san, and continued to watch her…

Then, the phone rings again. Shouko-san must have forgotten to mention something. I gesture for Sakurako-san to stay where she is, so I can answer the phone instead.

“I heard that you called earlier. Is this Kujou-san’s house?”

“Huh? Um… Yes. That’s right, this is the Kujou house.”

I carelessly answered the phone since I assumed it would be Shouko-san or something. I straighten my posture even though they can’t see me. It’s the principal of the Hinode Preschool who was out earlier.

“Hakoishi-san and I still exchange New Year’s cards, even now. She was my husband’s… classmate. She was a family friend back when my husband was healthy.”

“Oh, i-is that so.”

“So then… is… Sakurako Kujou-san there?”

“Huh?”

I immediately switch the phone to speaker so Sakurako-san can hear. I turn to Sakurako-san. She calmly nods.

“Yes, she is…”

“…She told me something before. If a woman named Sakurako Kujou contacts me, I should give her her address.”

“R-really?!”

“Yes. Hakoishi-san has been living in Asahikawa ever since she left her job here.”

Part 5

Around this time last year, I was hospitalized and stuck in bed. When I think back on it, a lot has happened in the past year. Where did it start? Maybe it was the first time I met Sakurako-san. In that case, when were the seeds of tragedy sown for the Kujou family, and who nurtured them?

Once Christmas is over, the air in the city suddenly feels like it’s the end of the year. The day after the phone call we stopped by a sweets shop in Asahimachi, then Sakurako-san and I headed to Keiko Hakoishi-san’s house at the address we got from the Hinode Preschool principal. It’s a small, old house behind a bookstore along the Suehiro Loop Line.

“…Are we really going?”

“How many times have you asked that this morning? She’s waiting for us, so why not go?”

“I guess not, but…”

I’ve said it over and over. I’m still on the fence about this. Of course I think it’s necessary to know the truth behind Soutarou-kun’s death so she can move past it, and so we can escape from the hands of Hanabusa’s ghosts. But at the same time, I wonder. Maybe it’d be better to just forget everything, pretend it never happened, and move on. That way no one would get hurt. Honestly, I don’t know which way is right or wrong. I just want her to live a peaceful life. Not just Sakurako-san, but all the people who were affected by Soutarou-kun’s death. I know that’s impossible, of course.

“…It might be a trap.”

"…"

"If something bad were to happen to you-"

Or if she does something bad-

"I'm just going to hear what she has to say. This doesn't mean she killed him," Sakurako-san says with a calm, gentle smile.

I can sense her determination, which gets my own heart pumping. That's enough, let's stop this. Just turn the steering wheel the other way. Maybe we can go skiing in Asahidake again. The hot springs in Sounkyo sound good, too. Or fish for pond smelt in Shumarinaiko. Or climb a mountain in Nukabira. We could go to the movie theatre in front of the station and see that popular anime movie. Anything is fine. Anywhere works. I just want to get out of here. Away from reality. Away from tragedy. Far, far away.

As if shaking off my wishes, Sakurako-san gets out of the car.

"You can wait here."

"No, I'll come. I won't be able to stop anything weird from happening if I'm out here."

That goes for both the other party, and Sakurako-san. I know the risks. I don't care if I get stabbed in the stomach again. As long as I can be somewhat of a deterrent.

Sakurako-san rings the intercom and states her name. Kei-san must have heard from the principal that we were coming already. "It's open, come in," she says, not seeming particularly worried. She doesn't greet us at the entrance. The reason becomes clear as soon as we reach the living room. She's sitting in a wheelchair. Her hair is completely white, and she has deeper wrinkles than in the photograph. She looks much softer than she used to, probably because of the deep smile lines by her eyes.

When she sees me, her eyes widen in surprise for a moment. Ah… I kind of get it. She must have thought I was Soutarou-kun for half a second. She must have been expecting Sakurako-san to come alone. She quickly pretends to be calm, and welcomes us.

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has. I didn't think you would remember me."

Sakurako-san hands Kei-san a bag of sweets. It's double bagged so it doesn't get wet and torn from the snow. Kei-san holds it up and smiles.

"Oh… You remember Marunishi's Chinese steamed buns?"

"I remembered that you liked them."

"Oh my, 2 boxes."

These aren't your typical Chinese steamed buns like the ones with pork or anko filling. They're large, crescent shaped, dorayaki-like confections with fragrant dough and a smooth anko filling.

"You've grown up to be so considerate. I'll go prepare tea. I can't finish all of these by myself, so please enjoy them with me," Kei-san says as if she were welcoming a close friend.

"We don't need tea. We don't plan on staying for long." Sakurako-san promptly declines the offer, but…

"No. I expect you'll be staying a while. There's a lot to talk about," a man says as he leaves the kitchen.

"Boy."

Sakurako-san immediately tries to defend me. She forces me back behind her. The man watches us and smiles. His smile looks familiar, somehow.

"…Who are you?" Sakurako-san asks in a low, growling voice.

It should be my first time meeting him, but he looks so, so familiar. His voice, too. I'm sure it was-

"Y… Yamaji… san?"

At that moment, all the dots inside my head feel like they're connecting.

"But… That can't be…" I manage to squeeze the words out.

The corners of his mouth turn up. "I knew you'd get it, Boy. It was worth sending all those emails."

"You're Yamaji?"

"Yes, I'm Yamaji. We're not strangers."

He looks at me with a fearless smile on his face. My tongue feels completely dry from nervousness. I squeeze Sakurako-san's arm. This man is Yamaji-san, but he's not the Teruhiko Yamaji that we know. This is Youichi Yamaji, Yamaji-san's older brother who got involved with Hanabusa then disappeared.

“I thought it was strange… You were the one who approached Azechi and the others that day. You’re the one who tried to have Sakurako-san arrested.”

“Unfortunately, I failed to lure in the other two, but I'm grateful for your help in catching Yoshimi.”

“Then, could it be… are you Phantom…?” I wring out the words. Just then, I hear the sound of water boiling coming from the kitchen.

“Well, it’s fine. First, I’ll make some tea. The four of us can enjoy a nice, pleasant chat. There’s a lot to talk about.” He makes an exaggerated gesture to the couch, then goes back to the kitchen.

I want to run away. Sakurako-san purses her lips and glares at the entrance to the kitchen where Yamaji-san just disappeared, looks at Kei-san, then sits down on the couch with a thud. With her arms and legs crossed, Sakurako-san has her usual haughty look. Kei-san forces a smile.

“But… I knew you’d come. I knew you’d come here some day.”

Taking out one box and putting the paper bag to the side, Kei-san smiles as she carefully unwraps the box of sweets.

“I really don’t intend to talk for long. I only want to know two things: are you Suzushiro’s aunt, and did you kill Soutarou?”

“…”

Kei-san just smiles silently. She just stares at us with a smile on her face, saying nothing.

“Why?” Sakurako-san says, needing to wring her voice out. “Why?! If it’s not true, then say so!” Unable to bear the silence, Sakurako-san raises her voice.

But all Kei-san does is smile.

“What did we ever do to you?! Were you angry about being fired for no good reason?! Were you being manipulated by Suzushiro?!” Sakurako-san’s voice is cracking.

Kei-san still smiles as if she hadn’t even heard Sakurako-san’s questions. She slowly turns to look out the window.

“It’s… Snowing.”

I look out the window, and sure enough, there’s large flakes of snow painting the world white. The snow is gentle. Gentle, fleeting, and fragile.

“…”

Sakurako-san bites her lip hard to hold back her anger.

“I… Don’t blame you. Not now, and not in the past.”

“What do you mean? I've committed no crimes.”

“I see. So you haven’t done anything. You haven’t done anything wrong, but… That’s unrelated. You were born into the Kujou family. That’s your crime.”

“What…?”

“Your sin was that you were born into a sinful family. You were born with it. It’s a sin that can’t be forgiven or outrun.”

Kei-san’s smile twists into an angry one. Her Noh mask-like face turns into a Hannya.

“Your aunt stole my sister’s husband from her and caused his death. My poor sister couldn’t bear the grief, and took her own life. And what about all of you? You trample over others’ corpses while pretending to be good people, enjoying your happiness.”

“That’s why you killed Soutarou?! For such an absurd reason?”

“If you consider that absurd, then were the deaths of my sister and my brother in law reasonable? Kiyoshi lost his parents because of your aunt. So I took the son away from his parents. That’s not absurd at all, it’s justice!”

“No, that’s irrational! Your sister and brother in law chose to take their own lives! They weren’t murdered like Soutarou was!”

As Sakurako-san objects, Kei-san’s face distorts even further. My heart hurts, like it’s being crushed.

“Is that really true? Is it really just because of that…?”

“‘Just’ because of that? People like you will never understand.”

Kei-san looks at Sakurako-san coldly, while Sakurako-san glares back with her eyes burning. Just as Sakurako-san said, those two took their own lives of their own volition. But when I think about the reason, I understand what Kei-san is saying. It’s painful. They’re the same, I think. In the end, the two are the same. They both had their younger sibling taken from them.

“But still… Soutarou was an innocent child.”

“So what? My brother-in-law and sister were innocent,” Kei-san says with firm rejection. “...Your aunt almost killed my brother in law,

but all they did was send him away with a small amount of money. Your grandfather didn't even attend the funeral. The same goes for when my sister died afterwards. It's like your aunt killed those two young people. When I came to work at his house as a nanny, he didn't even notice."

It's true that if the head of the Kujou family, or any member of the family, had attended the funeral and saw Kei-san grieving, they would have realized who she was when she arrived. Perhaps they wouldn't have left Soutarou-kun's care to her, or they could have apologized again. But no one did, and no one could.

"My sister was my only family. She was supposed to finally be happy with Seiichi-kun…"

Kei-san's body shakes with sadness and anger as large teardrops overflow from her eyes. Still, Sakurako-san continues to glare at her. It's only natural. But even so– Even so, I think it was wrong for Soutarou-kun to be the victim. Those wounds hurt. It's miserable and painful to have someone taken away from you like that. It's unforgivable. But despite all that, you can't turn it around and hurt someone else.

"You all murdered my sister, but there's no law that can punish you. Nobody could save Kiyoshi and I from our sorrow and hatred."

"So you're saying you did it yourselves…?"

"Yes, that's right. I had to punish you with my own hands. What's wrong with that? I had what was most precious to me stolen, so I stole what was most precious to your family. That's all!"

"…"

If looks could kill, there would be enough hatred and rage in Sakurako-san's eyes to kill Kei-san. Unable to watch yet unable to run away, I try to get between Sakurako-san and Kei-san out of fear of what their fury will do.

"Sit down, please," Yamaji-san grabs my arm to stop me. "Don't get in their way. This is between the two of them," he says.

As I sit back on the couch, he places a steaming cup of tea in front of each of us. He places a sharp knife in front of Sakurako-san and Kei-san, as well. I hear both of them gasp.

"Wha… What are you implying?!"

Yamaji-san just looks at the two of them, unruffled. I get goosebumps from the tension running between Sakurako-san and Kei-san. The silver light heightens the tension in the air. They both seem to understand. Even the slightest movement will make it snap. After a long silence, Kei-san lets out a weak sigh.

“...I’ve been watching from here. Watching as your family fell apart.”

“You must have enjoyed that. Now there’s only Ume and I left in the house.”

“Right… But I thought you’d find me sooner.”

She sounds like she wanted to be found. No, more like she’s been waiting. All this time. Waiting for Sakurako-san to come here.

“...So?”

“Hm?”

“So what did you get out of all this?”

“...”

“Was your revenge sweet? What did you get out of it? How will you end this story? What did you want me to do this whole time you’ve been waiting?”

Sakurako-san slams her right hand down on the table. The knife and teacup shudder, making a small sound.

“Sakurako-san.”

If I could, I’d like to pick up the knife and throw it far away, but I’m afraid that even that would break the tension in the air. I have to stay calm.

“...I wonder who said that revenge is sweet. I never thought it was sweet. It’s just bitter, and… Strange. It never fills me up. It never ends.”

“Of course it won’t. No matter how many people you take revenge on, your sister and my brother will never come back.”

“You’re right,” Kei-san says, then suddenly reaches for the knife.

Sakurako-san flinches, but she doesn’t move away. She keeps glaring at Kei-san. Kei-san’s wrinkled hand takes hold of the knife, and slides it across the table. The knife is now in front of Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san looks at the knife and Kei-san, like she’s wondering what’s going on.

“It won’t end, so someone has to end it.”

“What are you saying?”

“You hate me, don’t you, Sakurako-chan? Then kill me with your own two hands. With your hatred.”

Sakurako-san’s breath catches in her throat.

“Please kill me. That will prove that you’re the daughter of a criminal. I’ll prove that the blood of a murderer runs through your veins.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“You’re the one being ridiculous! You must hate me, the same way I hate you! If I were in your shoes, I would put a knife to your throat and kill you right here and now! You want to do that, don’t you?!”

Kei-san grabs the knife and slams it into the table with a great amount of force. The wooden table easily stops the tip of the knife, but the force knocks a teacup over.

“...”

The cup rolls across the table. The tea chases after it, flowing between the grain of the wood, and making a tiny waterfall onto the carpet. The two of them stay motionless until the waterfall turns into trickling drops.

“...How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Kill Soutarou. I want to hear it,” Sakurako-san says in a dark, terrifying voice.

“...I didn’t do anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Right. I just left him naked in a basement for 3 days. He was still crying on the second day, but by the third he lost his strength and went quiet.”

“...” Sakurako-san gulps like she’s trying to endure something.

“Sou-chan… He was always afraid of the dark at bedtime, so he needed a stuffed animal. It was a small red fox. He would fall asleep while petting its fur,” Kei-san murmurs with her gaze lowered as she remembers.

“He was loved and cherished. I would have expected him to be more selfish, but he was a good child. So… While he was crying and shivering from the cold and loneliness, he kept apologizing to me. He didn’t know what he did wrong. It’s ironic,” Kei-san continues. “I thought to myself that little Soutarou-kun knew how to apologize, but none of the adults seemed to know how. He called out for you over and over again. 'Nee-Nee,' 'Help me, Nee-Nee.’ Even though you didn’t have an ounce of charm, he thought of you as his reliable older sister - but that crucial day was different. He was all on his own with no one to rescue him.”

I hear Sakurako-san take a short breath. I don’t want to hear it.

“I can’t listen to this anymore,” I think to myself. Just as I’m about to open my mouth, Yamaji-san stands behind me.

There are two knives in front of me. Why didn’t I realize there might be a third? I choke on my words as I feel something hard press against my back.

“I really didn’t do anything. I just left him in the dark. After not hearing anything for half a day I looked inside and he wasn’t breathing.”

She says she doesn’t know the cause of death. It could have been hunger, thirst, the cold, or another reason entirely. She washed the feces and urine off his body, dressed him, then gently put him in the pond at Nagayama Shrine. She chose that place because it’s close to God. At least his soul won’t get lost. Besides, Soutarou-kun liked that pond. When he was younger, Kei-san would hold his hand and they’d walk around it, over and over.

Hearing that, a tear rolls down my cheek. Trying to contain her anger, Sakurako-san clenches her fists on the table tighter and tighter until they’re completely white.

“...And then what did you do?” Sakurako-san finally forces herself to ask. “Did you enjoy it?”

“Hm?”

“Soutarou was a cheerful, kind boy. He loved you, even though you were difficult to please. Did you enjoy watching him slowly die over those 3 days? Did your blood boil from the feeling of your revenge? Did your body tremble with cruel pleasure?”

Kei-san's breath catches in her throat.

"You must have found it funny to hear Soutarou calling for me and apologizing."

"...No, never! There's no way I could find it enjoyable! It was painful. I tried so many times to forgive him, to let him out and warm him up, but I couldn't. For Kiyoshi's sake. Besides, if I let him out, everything would come to light. We'd be the ones getting judged!"

The opposite of the original sin is self guilt. Sakurako-san chose to embrace her original sin, and Kei-san's choice was her own sin. The Kujou family can't be tried by law. Kei-san is the one who should be tried. I understand that she couldn't go back on what she did, but-but I wish she had.

"For your nephew… Was he really that important to you?"

"He was… Kiyoshi was the last thing my sister left behind. He was like the reincarnation of the son I'd lost in the womb."

"I see…"

Sakurako-san pulls out the knife that's stuck in the table.

"Sa…!"

Thud. I'm cut off by the sound of the knife being placed back on the table.

"That's enough, then," Sakurako-san says flatly after taking a deep breath.

"...What is?"

"Even though you kidnapped him, you weren't able to hurt him directly. Locking him up for days was risky, but you had to do it because you didn't truly enjoy watching him die. You couldn't hurt him, so you had no choice but to keep him locked up."

"..."

"I understand your anger, I hate you, but I also know that if we don't cut this off somewhere, it will continue forever. Even if I kill you, it won't bring Soutarou back," Sakurako-san says, pushing the knife in her hand toward Kei-san. "So instead of using this knife, I'm going to ask you to live."

"...What?"

"No matter what happens in the future, I want you to live strong and never take your own life."

Kei-san looks at Sakurako-san in shock, I think I hear Yamaji-san let out a short sigh of dissatisfaction behind me.

“You… Are you serious?”

“I am. I don’t like jokes. I’m sure you already know that very well,” Sakurako-san says with a dignified expression,

“But… There’s no doubt that I killed Sou-chan, so why? You hate me, don’t you? You hate me so much that you want to kill me, right?! So why are you telling me to live–”

“Be quiet! You’re alive right now! You’re still alive, so you have to live!”

Even though Kei-san is completely bewildered, she’s still trying to provoke Sakurako-san’s anger. Sakurako-san stands up and raises her voice, like she has run out of patience.

“Life is worth something! No matter if you’re good, bad, or born with sins, it’s still the same life! You have to live, live, live! There’s no dignity in the weight of a life. No matter what kind of life it is, it’s still ‘one life.’ There’s no difference. Because we’re born, we live. Living is the mission, fate, and essence of every creature born into this world. Living creatures have evolved to survive in their environment, and avoid pain. Even if we can’t change our bodies, we have to develop our society and sciences to be able to defeat illnesses, resist death, and live strong. All of this is in order to survive.

“Every life is born to live. So you have to live. There’s no way around it. Some people talk about reincarnation, but I don’t believe in that. There’s a lot to learn from death. Death is the destination of each precious life. But that’s the end of life. There’s nothing past it, so don’t aim for a place that doesn’t exist. Live in the present.

“ Before life, there is no reason or punishment, just destiny. You should live your life to the fullest before you die. Let yourself grow old. Wait for the day your heart stops on its own, without relying on a knife. If I hate you, then get your revenge on us by living a healthy life!”

This is my first time hearing such a powerful cry from someone’s soul. It’s an intense explosion of life force. Sakurako-san’s face is red from anger as she frantically shouts to us. I can feel the power and vitality streaming from her body. The air is trembling. My heart is, as

well. I've known all along She loves bones, but that's undeniable proof that she believes in, and is a slave to, life.

Sakurako-san is always looking straight ahead at life. I'm sure that she'll continue in the same way. That's what I like about Sakurako-san. It's not about good or bad with her, she's simply someone who adores the beauty of life. I am alive. She affirms every piece of my being. She, more than anyone else, loves, enjoys, and accepts my existence; although I'm not the only one, unfortunately.

Kei-san is stunned speechless at Sakurako-san's fierce, soulful words. Sakurako-san will never forgive Kei-san, but she also completely forgives her for that sin.

"Why… How can you say all that?"

"I've made my decision. It's because I love Soutarou. Hatred is not rational. Above all else, that boy was a mass of 'life'. On the night he was cremated, I had a dream where he was leading many lost lives to Heaven. He really was like the king of 'life'." Sakurako-san speaks like she's singing with her arms spread.

I feel like I can almost see countless skeletal specimens behind her.

"That's why I won't take a life for his sake. Even if you are the person who took him from me. No matter how much I hate you. I will keep living, so you must keep living."

Tears spill down Kei-san's cheeks. She slowly nods as tears continue to wet her lap. Just then, I hear a dry crackling sound from behind me.

"What a fine speech. It almost brought me to tears- which is why the two of you are such a pain." Yamaji-san spits out the second half with deep contempt. "It may sound like a moving story, but your words lack a 'human heart'."

"...What do you mean?"

"You don't understand how difficult it is for humans to 'live' in this age. It's like you're a wild animal. You live by instinct and reflex, rather than understanding the world of humans."

"What do you know? You're just one of the 'ghosts,' right?" Sakurako-san scowls at Yamaji-san.

Yamaji-san grabs my wrist and pulls me toward him, as if he's using me as a shield.

"Call me a Holy Ghost instead, won't you? At least I protect life against the evil of death."

"Holy Ghost? You're pretty shameless, and that means a lot coming from me." Sakurako-san says with a light laugh.

"Please let go… It hurts," I say.

Rather than reply, Yamaji-san tightens his grip even more.

"If you're going to call yourself the Holy Ghost, then why are you doing bad things? How can you say that what you're doing is on the side of justice? What was Hanabusa's goal…?!" I say, trying to hide the pain even though it feels like my wrist is going to break.

I don't want to lose.

"His goal was the poison of evil."

"Poison…?"

A chill runs up my spine. Memories of the murderer who caught venomous snakes and made them eat each other come to mind.

"He wanted to have bad people kill each other to create the most evil demon possible. He wanted to control the evil in this world by fear and hatred, since the law and 'justice' didn't work. Even if the law protects bad people, we ghosts will never forgive them. It's a hidden law that deals with evil by using evil."

Someone once told me that justice exists in conviction. I'm once again convinced that that nameless ghost was Youichi Yamaji-san.

"And that demon was Hanabusa?" Sakurako-san asks.

"No. He was nothing more than a poisonous insect. He was a beautiful, intelligent, wicked person, and now he's gone. On the day of Soutarou's funeral, Hanabusa met you. When he heard you praising your brother's remains as beautiful, he saw Agiku in you. Unfortunately, you didn't have the heart to hate evil. Jealousy and hatred are important impulses that drive humans."

Yamaji-san spits out his words. "And now you're saying stupid things like 'live.'" He sounds serious this time. "Hanabusa decided to create a ruthless queen of sin like her with his own hands. Kiyomi was a prototype, but unfortunately, she didn't want to follow orders and

escaped from her cage. She was nothing more than an imitation. Only a direct descendent of ‘Agiku’ would be worthy as a successor.”

“I’m not a direct descendant of her. We’re related by the third degree.” Sakurako-san huffs, but Yamaji-san ignores her.

“All this time, he’s been watching over you, repeating the evil butterfly’s curse. We destroyed thoughtless, unworthy evil, and only kept those who wielded their blades for justice as ‘specimen experts.’ We kept increasing our number of supporters that way. Some, like the ‘rainmakers’ were only kept for their body disposal skills. We specimen experts - the ghosts - all hate evil.”

“You too, Yamaji?”

“Obviously!” Yamaji-san harshly replies to Sakurako-san’s question.

“It’s idiotic. You all dream too much. Maybe you’d be better suited to being an author than a criminal? Leave all that to the judiciary, or complain to a politician.”

“What?”

Sakurako-san sneers faintly. Yamaji-san was too absorbed in the conversation and had started to loosen his grip, but he tightens it again. I feel like my wrist is about to break.

“Since you have no human heart, Sakurako Kujou, you’ll never be able to truly understand the feelings of the victims and bereaved families,” Yamaji-san says coldly.

Sakurako-san’s brow is deeply furrowed.

“Are you dreaming? You’re the one not looking at reality. The victims and their families want to be saved *now* ! Do you understand? Not someday, but right at this moment. They don’t want a long trial, or some half-hearted speech about regret. Even if you spend a long time truly reflecting deeply, it’ll be too late. They want an answer immediately - a clear ending!”

The feeling of a knife being pressed against my back disappears; or so I thought, but it’s now being pressed against my throat.

“Shoutarou!” Sakurako-san shrieks my name.

I feel a sense of deja vu. No, I’m sure of it. This is the second time. Probably. Am I destined to always be stabbed in December?

“That child has nothing to do with this. Let him go, Yamaji.”

“It's the same for everyone. Both the victims and their families. Tragedy suddenly strikes. It’s illogical. I’ve seen it all before… And I was never able to do anything. When I was a police officer, I could never save the victim.”

The cold feeling of the knife soon turns sharp. It’s cutting into my skin. I instinctively tighten my throat, which only makes the pain worse. I want to run away from the pain and fear. But… I decided not to run away, and to come here for Sakurako-san’s sake.

“A… Arteries are pretty strong. It’s hard to cut them. It’ll cause a lot of bleeding and turn into a huge problem… You should aim for the heart. Otherwise Kei-san, who is disabled, will have a hard time cleaning up. Since you were a police officer, you should know how hard it is, right?”

I desperately try to keep my voice from trembling with fear. The police don’t help clean up crime scenes. It’s not part of their job in Japan, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other people who can help the bereaved families.

Yamaji-san glances at me for a moment, then sighs with displeasure. He takes the knife away from my throat. Then he slowly lowers it to my heart.

“You’re brave. If you’re trying to look cool in front of the girl you like, you’re outclassed. There are more suitable butterflies around you.”

“You mean Kougami? I love her as a friend, and that’s all. And I don’t like Sakurako-san that way, either.”

“That’s quite enough, you two,” Sakurako-san says sullenly.

“But it’s true. If this boy died, you wouldn’t really be sad about it. You don’t know how to grieve, so all you can do is pretend to be sad. You probably wouldn’t even be able to shed a single tear. That’s not how it is for real bereaved people.”

Yamaji-san points his chin toward Kei-san. Kei-san stirs slightly with panic, then looks down.

“Do you understand? Lives that have been taken can never be returned. The wounds will never heal. What the bereaved want is ‘pain’ and ‘blood.’ It’s not a considerate ‘death penalty.’ It’s painful.

It’s struggling through pain and suffering, ending only in despair rather than release. I hate criminals because I love them. Hatred is love. Take the knife, Sakurako Kujou,” Yamaji-san says.

Sakurako-san laughs it off. “I’ve already told you that I don’t like jokes. I don’t want to kill you and make myself into a criminal.”

“You’re misunderstanding me. You have to kill this woman, otherwise I’ll kill this boy.”

I hear both Sakurako-san and Kei-san’s breath catch.

“Kill this woman. You are descended from Agiku, and were raised under Hanabusa’s watchful eye to become the ruler of evil. Make your name known, and become the queen who protects society from criminals through fear!”

I can see that Yamaji-san is gripping the knife tighter. I try desperately not to close my eyes in fear. Sakurako-san smiles faintly.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“...What?”

“I just think it’s funny. You’re being used. You just told me about your beliefs and justice. ‘We ' are just good at talking.” Sakurako-san laughs. “I understand. This ‘Hanabusa’ guy liked sphenoid bones. It makes sense, since it’s such a beautiful bone. His ideas of good and evil are just a convenient way to collect more of them. You’re nothing more than an insect who preys on the sense of justice of other fools just like yourself.”

“No! Kiyoshi is-”

Kei-san tries to argue back, but Sakurako-san violently slams her hand against the wall.

“That’s what a perfect ruler is like! He fools you by feeding you nice-sounding words, but all he does is bring destruction, misery, and death to all of his dens!” Sakurako-san says before grabbing Kei-san tightly by the throat. “Were you happy to raise that man? Was Sae happy? You’re so blinded by love and hatred that you’ve turned a blind eye to all the inconsistencies!”

“Ah…”

Sakurako-san violently shakes Kei-san. She lets out a frail shriek as her wheelchair creaks and rocks. She lets go of Kei-san, who is at a loss for words, as if she’s pushing her away. Sakurako-san put too

much force into it, sending Kei-san and her wheelchair crashing into the sideboard. She looks down on Kei-san coldly, then glares at Yamaji-san.

“I don’t think Hanabusa, the man you believed in, would genuinely want the law to be ruled by evil. That’s ridiculous. Do you really think that’s possible?!”

“...Even so, the gears are already turning! That man is gone! We, the ghosts, remain! Even without Hanabusa, we can achieve our justice! Now that you know the full story, it’s time for you two to choose. Cooperate, or die. Those are your only choices!”

“No, there’s four.”

“What do you–”

“Take your hands off of Shoutarou-kun. This won’t work. It’s over, big brother,” a cold voice says from behind us.

Part 6

“...Teruhiko?”

“What justice is that… Brother, what you’re doing is out of line!”

Yamaji-san– or rather, Youichi calls his younger brother’s name, failing to hide the trembling in his voice. Rather than respond, Teruhiko-san shouts angrily.

“Just give up already. I won’t miss at this distance. It may be a model gun, but it’s customized to be powerful enough to blow apart your skull at this range. You know I’ve always been good with guns, don’t you, brother?”

“...And you know a knife is the better choice at this distance.”

“Go ahead and try. Right now the situation is four against one, though.”

I see Sakurako-san breathe a sigh of relief. She rushes over to Kei-san, who is trembling and clinging to the sideboard. Ah, I see. So the unnatural violence was a diversion. She drew attention to herself, then the noise covered the sound of Akihiko-san’s footsteps and the sound of him opening the door.

“Your biggest mistake was assuming you’re the only one with a listening device, Older Yamaji.” Sakurako-san smiles fearlessly as she pulls a bug out from between the two layers of the double wrapped snacks we brought.

Yoichi-san suddenly starts laughing self-deprecatingly.

“But… you can’t shoot me, Teru.”

“There’s no use trying to appeal to my emotions. I resigned from the police force to stop you. I had to stop you at all costs. I’m prepared to give up my future for it. If you don’t let go of Shoutarou-kun and turn yourself in right now, I won’t hesitate to shoot you.”

“N.. No way…”

I get chills across my whole body, though I can’t tell if it’s from anger or sadness. What is justice, I wonder? It feels like I’ve been thinking that ever since I met Sakurako-san. As a child, I admired heroes. They were people of justice. Back then, the boundary between good and bad was so clear. But now, I envy those heroes. For an ordinary person like me, the concept of “evil” is too vague. I’ve always wanted to be someone who does the right thing. Even more so now that I’ve met Sakurako-san, someone I want to protect.

I’m still in high school, so I still have a little more time before I become an adult, but I’m not young enough to be called a kid anymore. I’ve begun to realize that my idea of common sense, and the world I’ve taken for granted aren’t universal. I want to be a person with a strong sense of justice. But right now, I don’t know what that “justice” is.

Both of the Yamaji brothers are definitely righteous people. I’ve understood that ever since I met them by the sea in Mashike, and in Shitara-sensei’s file. So they both became police officers. And now, in the name of justice, one brother is trying to kill me, and the other is prepared to kill his brother. What should I believe in? What exactly is justice? Who is it for? What could be more sad than this?

“...Stop it, you two! You’re brothers, so you shouldn’t be hurting each other!”

I, Shoutarou Tatewaki, was born and raised in Asahikawa. Asahikawa can feel cramped, but that also means we have strong community and family ties. Though it sometimes felt annoying and suffocating, I grew up feeling loved. I had my 3 grandpa and 2 grandmas, my older brother, and my mom. I lost my father at an early age, but I grew up with more than enough love. I always thought that was normal, but unfortunately it isn’t, as you can tell from opening any

social media site. I know well that there are times when beloved family members can turn into lethal weapons.

That's why I want to protect them. My family. My bonds. Sakurako-san's "family" is a little different from normal. I've met with a lot of bereaved families and have seen how they fall apart. Some mothers have died to protect their babies, while others killed their husbands to protect their child's unborn life. There are even those who took their own life to stop their son from turning evil.

Family ties are both sad and strong. Even if you try to escape from them, they'll stick to you, and can even destroy you. But they can also bring happiness. I'm a very happy kid. I love my family. That's why I want to protect others as well. I want to become a forensic scientist so I can at least protect the bereaved families from inevitable deaths. I've made up my mind. I suppose my justice is to protect familial love. Because humans can't be born alone.

"This definitely isn't just! Both of you, stop it! Youichi-san, do you really want to make your little brother into a murderer? Do you want your parents to be the parents of both the victim and the perpetrator?! Are you going to make the same mistake again in front of these people who have lost their sister and brother?! Of course there are lives that the law couldn't protect. I'm sure that right now, there are a lot of people who want to be saved, but… After meeting Sakurako-san, I've heard the voices of countless people. There are ups and downs to everything. Just as life and death are polar opposites, justice has many sides to it. There's more than one truth. Justice isn't flat, it's 3 dimensional!"

Yamaji-san's justice is definitely just to someone. But it's not to me .

"It's wrong to judge people from one perspective. That's not justice, it's egoism! You're not a saint. You're an egoist who uses violence to assert his beliefs."

"What do you know?!" Youichi-san shouts while he plunges the knife at my heart.

I'm shaken by a strong impact. A dull pain runs through my solar plexus, and it's hard for me to breathe. The fear of death gives me

goosebumps all over my body, but he only manages to cut my sweater. My skin hasn't even been pierced, let alone my organs.

"Kuh!"

"What?!"

"You can buy a knife-proof vest off Emazon for only 10 000 yen these days!" I say while coughing. I can hear the knife sliding down.

Of course I bought one. I already got stabbed once last year. I won't make the same mistake twice!

Teruhiko-san takes advantage of Youichi-san's momentary opening. They're both former police officers, but Teruhiko-san moves faster. In an instant he twists Youichi-san's arm to make him drop the knife, then kicks it away.

"Shoutarou!"

Sakurako-san reaches out her arms to me. I jump into them without hesitation.

"I'm so glad," she smiles as she hugs me tightly.

Out of all the times I've seen Sakurako-san smile, this time is the cutest and prettiest of them all.

"Kei-san, call the police! Hurry!" Sakurako-san calls out.

Kei-san hurriedly takes her phone out of her pocket. I turn around and see Teruhiko-san and Youichi-san in a struggle.

"Stay back!"

As I step forward to do something, Teruhiko-san stops me.

"Please, stop this! Just give in already, Youichi-san !" I shout in vain.

Youichi-san takes the model gun from Teruhiko-san. No!

"Don't shoot! Aren't you family?! He's your brother! No human being is completely alone! Each person is part of the collective! Just as humans are made up of 206 bones, they're also made of a collection of many lives connected in ways that can't be seen, like friends and family!"

"Approximately!" Sakurako-san calls out from behind me.

"...What?"

"There aren't 206 bones. There's *approximately* 206 bones, Boy. It can vary from person to person."

"Oh…?"

“Fusion state varies with age, and there’s individual differences in the fusion of the coccyx, ribs, sesamoid bones, etc. Babies have over 300 bones that–”

Despite the situation being as it is, Sakurako-san starts correcting me with a serious expression, as if nothing is more important. Genuinely, from the bottom of my heart, what is wrong with her? Even the Yamaji brothers go blank for a second when Sakurako-san starts going off. But it only lasts a moment, and this time, Youichi-san is the one who’s faster.

“Grh!”

He kicks Teruhiko-san hard. He uses his weight to push his brother into the couch.

“Seriously… This is why you people are such a pain. You destroy our common sense as easily as you breathe.”

Youichi-san aims his gun and laughs loudly. His smile is bright, like there’s nothing funnier than this.

“But that’s what attracted me, Sakurako Kujou. I’ve been dreaming of you. A world without bereaved families. A world where innocent people don’t suffer! A world that you can change!”

“Yamaji! Stop it!”

Just as Sakurako-san shouts, I hear a gunshot.

Part 7

I hurry along, through streets lined with old maple, elm, and ash trees. I walk along several hundred meters between Nagayama Shrine, the oldest shrine in town, to Daidouji, Tenneiji, and Myouzenji. I glance at the old buildings from the restoration era that are dotted around. As I travel down the old street, the lush greenery catches my eye. It’s a maple tree that’s supposedly just under 150 years old, The nearby japanese elm tree that’s just as old, and the cherry blossom trees that bloom each spring sway in the wind.

A white mansion appears, surrounded by all of these huge trees. Judging by its condition, the wooden, colonial style house must be over 100 years old. It has a black frame to contrast the white siding, and the bay window has an elaborate design. The entrance is decorated with a hoshishippou pattern. It was probably considered modern at the time it was built. It’s a charming house that combines

Western and Japanese architecture. Though it has deteriorated somewhat over the years, the mansion is still impressive.

Although it looks like it's about to be swallowed by all the trees in the yard, the whiteness can still catch anyone's eye. The same goes for the owner of this house. While it's unique and feels out of place, it has a dangerous beauty to it.

I pass through the green archway that's covered in ivy, and walk toward the garden along the stone path with dandelions and chickweed poking out of the cracks. The garden looks beautiful from the outside, but from the inside it looks poorly maintained and disorganized. As I make my way through the garden, being careful to avoid spider webs and hanging branches, I come across a gap in the overgrown trees where "she" is standing.

Her white shirt looks dazzling as it reflects the sunlight filtering through the trees. She doesn't seem to notice me, since she has her back toward me. She's looking at the base of an old cherry blossom tree. Sakurako-san is a bit taller than the average woman, and she has a solid bone structure, which she is proud of, so she attracts attention even when she's just standing there. Even just looking at her back, she looks picturesque.

"Hello."

I consider admiring her butt for a while before she notices me, but being impatient as I am, I can't resist calling out to her.

"Hey, you're late," she says, turning to look at me with a smile. I'm glad I decided to call out to her.

Her smile taught me what people mean when someone's smile is "like the sun," or "like a flower blooming." Her smile is beautiful and cute, shining bright just like the sun or a flower. It's even more dazzling than the summer sun. Since she's a proper young lady, she doesn't run up to greet me. Instead, she impatiently taps her foot, like a child who doesn't want to wait for candy. As usual, I'm the one who rushes over to her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's fine. Anyway, there's something I wanted your help with."

"What is it?"

“Ah, it’s just something that takes a bit too much strength for me,” she says, pointing her chin to the ground.

There’s a huge amount of bright red blood dripping from several large, gauze bags. The bags, piled up by the base of the cherry blossom tree, have something big inside.

“What is this…?”

“An Ezo deer.”

“...You picked something up again.”

“On my way back from the airport, I happened to see it by the side of the road. It only died less than an hour before I found it. I managed to disassemble it and load it up into a metal drum by myself, but it was quite a chore. They’re my bones. Of course, that’s just an expression, they’re–”

“No, I understand. You don’t need to explain it to me.”

Even after dumping the deer carcass into the boiling water, Sakurako-san is still talkative and lively. I suddenly lose the energy to keep up a conversation with her, so I cut her off. That’s always how it is with her. Even though she’s rich and beautiful, and she has that lovely smile.

“Why don’t we go have tea?”

At times like these, it’s best to silence her with something sweet. Since I’m not as good at making tea as Gran is, I give Sakurako-san the hot chocolate that I brought instead.

“This is wonderful!” she says.

Surprisingly, Sakurako-san has no idea what “instant coffee” is. Just add hot water, and you can have hot chocolate with milk.

“It’s so good!”

Sakurako-san loves sweet things, especially chocolate, so I thought she would be happy if I stopped at an imported food store and bought her this hot chocolate that comes in individual servings that only requires hot water. Apparently this hot chocolate is very similar to what my grandmother had at her homestay family in the United States. I don’t know if it’s the same brand, or if all American instant hot chocolate tastes like this. But Sakurako-san is pleased, so I’m happy, too.

“By the way, you like coffee, don’t you?” Sakurako-san asks suspiciously.

I take a sip of my hot chocolate even though it’s way too sweet for me.

“I guess I like it, but… it’s more that when I drink it, I feel like a grown man, you know?”

“From drinking coffee?”

“...Once when I slept over at a friend’s house I saw his dad wearing a suit and drinking black coffee in the morning and I thought he looked really cool.”

“If you want to be an adult, shouldn’t you be turning to cigarettes and alcohol?”

My mom always says that, but I don’t want to do something bad for me just to show off how grown up I am. Coffee at least helps you stay awake… And at one point I yearned to be an adult who could drink it black.

“I remember you saying something gross like ‘the components in the scent of coffee are the same as the smell of death.’”

“It’s true. I just don't understand why you would want to drink something so bitter.”

“And I can’t understand why you would choose to boil a dead animal in a pot,” I think to myself, though I would never say it.

This house is a sanctuary for bones, after all. I slowly look around and see all the pure white bones of fish and small animals scattered across the walls, in cases, and on the furniture. It’s a comfortable, soundless world. I close my eyes, listening to Sakurako-san’s breath and smelling the sweet hot chocolate. There’s things I need to talk about, things I *want* to talk about, but I can do that later. Time doesn’t flow in this house.

“I wish it was a bit sweeter,” Sakurako-san says, dissatisfied after drinking about a third of her hot chocolate.

I grin.

“I thought you might say that, so I prepared this as well,” I say as I pull a jar of white marshmallows out of my bag.

“Oh! Wow!”

Her eyes glitter brilliantly as she rushes toward me. Yes, please be grateful and happy. There's only 12 marshmallows in the jar even though it costed 600 yen since they're high class. Please enjoy them thoroughly.

"Ah!"

With a satisfying pop sound, Sakurako-san opens the jar and starts popping two round, white, fluffy marshmallows into her mouth.

"Hey! Those were super expensive! Show some restraint! Ah! Hey!"

Sakurako-san doesn't pay me any mind as she puts 4 more marshmallows into her hot chocolate. Before I know it, half of them are gone already.

"Haah…" Sakurako-san sighs with a happy smile on her face.

"Geez…"

Feeling frustrated, I put two marshmallows into my cup. As I expected, they're too sweet, making me regret my decision even more… Well, it's fine.

As always, seeing Sakurako-san's smile makes my anger instantly disappear. Even though it's still hot out, this old house is always cool year round. The hot chocolate brings just the right amount of warmth.

"By the way… How is Gran doing?"

"..."

"Sakurako-san?"

"Not good."

"Ah…"

"It's not that anything happened suddenly, though. Her disease is just progressing slowly but surely."

"...I see."

Late last year, Youichi Yamaji-san shot himself at Keiko Hakoishi-san's house. With his death, many things have been enveloped in darkness. Fortunately, if that's okay to say, we no longer have to live under Hanabusa's shadow. Hakoishi-san turned herself in to the police. Sakurako-san might not have wanted that, but for Hakoishi-san, I think it was a way to release herself from her guilt and

hatred. I think she wanted to atone for her sins, and finally live her own life.

We finally had peace, but I still had my third year of high school and entrance exams to finish. From then on, I studied like crazy. Kougami was a great teacher and rival for me. I'm glad we chose the same path. And so, spring came, and then summer. It all passed by in the blink of an eye. During that time, I stayed away from the Kujou house.

Right after the new year, Gran got sick, and had to be briefly hospitalized in Sapporo. During that time, Sakurako-san stayed in Sapporo with her. Her condition stabilized, and she was transferred to a hospital in Asahikawa, but I still never had the time to visit her. Today, I suddenly got a message from Sakurako-san. The reason for her message is very "her." She's making a specimen out of a deer that's too large to handle on her own. I was hoping it would be something a little different. For example, I hoped she would say that Gran was leaving the hospital soon so she wanted help cleaning, or something. That's not to say I'm too disappointed, though.

The Kujou house feels empty and sad without Gran around. Hector does, too. Now that Hector has turned 11, he seems to have aged dramatically. He spends most of his time sleeping in Sakurako-san's air conditioned bedroom.

Time never stops. I know that, but when I think about my beloved memories of the Kujou family from just one year ago, it makes me feel unbearably lonely. I pretend that my eyes are only stinging from the steam coming from my cocoa.

"Could I… Visit Gran in the hospital sometime? On a day when she's feeling better, even just for a little while?"

"No."

"Why?"

"There's no point in you going."

"No point… Don't say that."

I didn't expect to be refused so flatly, so I'm a little- no, I'm very shocked by Sakurako-san's harsh tone. I don't know what else to say, so I look down. Sakurako-san quietly shakes her head.

“That’s not it. It’s not that you can’t come… But she has dementia.”

“What…?”

“It has been progressing rapidly. Lately, she has been mistaking me for my aunt, or not recognizing me at all.”

“No! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!”

She has to be lying. This can’t be happening. I’m so shocked that I can’t help but speak too forcefully.

“It wasn’t too bad 6 months ago. She showed signs of forgetfulness, and other signs of her age. After she was hospitalized, she had postoperative delirium, and her life became different from usual. Before I knew it, her disease had progressed this much! I didn’t want to get in the way of your studying!”

“I can take a break from studying!”

We both lean in toward each other and yell, probably because we’re both just sad. Sakurako-san seems to notice the tears welling up in my eyes, so she sits back down in her chair.

“...If Ume were healthy, she would have told you not to visit. She would have wanted you to study hard. I wish I’d studied properly. I thought I could learn on my own, but there’s a limit. You need a good environment to learn. As Isozaki said, a genius like me should have become a world famous scholar.”

She deliberately exaggerates in a joking manner, but I’m sure it’s what she truly thinks, too. I know I should listen to her. But…

“So you should study as hard as you can. That’s my and Ume’s wish.”

“I know, but… Other things are important, too. No matter what shape she’s in, even if she doesn’t recognize me, I don’t want her to go without me ever seeing her, or having the chance to thank her and tell her how much I love her!”

I’ll study, too, of course. I don’t think a visit or two will get in the way of that. Rather, if I leave things as they are, it’ll bother me and the sadness will get in the way of my studying.

“Are you going to leave me with more regrets, Sakurako-san? Like with my grandma and the pudding?” I sniffle.

“Drink some water,” Sakurako-san says as she forces a box of tissues into my hands and offers me her half-drunk hot chocolate. “But… I see. Ume was a ‘grandma’ to you, too,” Sakurako-san says in a quiet, lonely murmur.

She smiles gently at me as I can't hide my sobs any longer. She strokes my head with her large hands.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have kept it from you. Let’s go together.”

When we arrive at the hospital ward Gran is staying in, one of the nurses at the nurse station notices Sakurako-san and trots over with a big smile.

“She’s been doing well this morning.”

“I see. Thank you, as always. I’m really grateful.” Sakurako-san bows unusually politely.

“It’s nothing~” the nurse shakes her head as her cheeks turn pink.

I think Sakurako-san is truly grateful, from the bottom of her heart. Since she takes care of Sakurako-san's precious Gran every day. I feel a bit relieved to hear that she’s doing well today. It would be painful to see her if she was in bad shape. Maybe she’ll be doing a bit better today. When we eventually reach a beautiful room at the back of the ward, Sakurako-san checks with me for a moment before opening the door.

I nod to her that I’m okay. It’s going to be fine. I’m ready for this.

“Hey, Ume. How are you? Today Boy is–” Sakurako-san tries to cheerfully call out to Gran, who is sitting on her bed watching TV.

“...Ume?”

Gran doesn’t reply. Instead, she glares at me- No, she’s staring at me with her eyes wide in surprise.

“L… Long time no see.”

Has she forgotten about me? I thought I’d prepared myself for this, but the shock still shakes me. I still manage to smile at her. If I didn’t, I’d probably cry. When she hears my voice, she makes a groaning “oooh…” sound.

“Gran?”

It wasn’t a groan, but a sob. Tears flow like waterfalls from her eyes. She spreads her arms out toward me, her whole body trembling.

“Young master Soutarou.”

“Ah…”

Sakurako-san and I look at each other in surprise. Gran staggers toward me and clings to me. She’s really strong. It’s hard to believe, since she’s so old and sick. That’s how desperate she is to not let go of me.

“Young master… I’ve been looking for you for so long…”

“Ume! What are you talking about? He isn’t…!”

“Stop! It’s fine.”

“But…”

“It’s fine… Yeah… This is fine…”

Yeah, it is. I suddenly understand now.

Sometimes, people have encounters that are almost like “fate.” Sometimes these encounters aren’t for their own sake, but to play an important role in saving someone else, or making someone else happy. Like a joint that moves a person’s life. Right. All this time, I thought I met her for my life’s sake. I thought she was there to help guide me down my path in life. But… Now I’m sure it was for this moment.

“--That’s right, Ume, but when are you talking about? I got lost a long time ago, back when I was in kindergarten.”

“Shoutarou…?”

“Not you, too, Nee-san. Are you two going to keep talking about that for the rest of my life? That day Ume and Nee-san came to the shrine to pick me up, then you guys and grandfather chewed me out for going out alone.”

“Oh… Is that what happened… I’ve been thinking that the young master disappeared all this time… That it was my fault… If only I’d gone with him…”

“That’s the day you made those delicious deep fried oysters, right? It’s all in the past, now. It’s over. You’ve been by our sides, helping us grow up into adults.”

“I see… Is that so…”

“That’s right, Ume. It was a bad dream, but it’s all over now.”

Miraculously, the words I want to say smoothly roll off my tongue. I didn't even have to think about it. Maybe it's the work of someone else inside of me. Maybe, if ghosts and such really exist…

"So from now on, you have to work on getting better, Ume. It's hard for me to put up with my picky sister every day."

"Oh dear! Are you eating too many sweets again, young lady?!"

Sakurako-san looks at me, horrified I brought up the subject, then shrugs.

"Aw, geez," she says as she scratches the back of her head, looking troubled. "I-It's not a big deal! I guess you're just going to have to come back and take care of me, then." Sakurako-san sniffs and puffs her chest out arrogantly.

"See? She's always like this. See what I have to put up with?"

"My goodness. This is no time for me to be lying around."

"I want to eat your cooking again, too, Ume."

"I understand. I'll get better right away! My health has always been my strong point!"

So, we spend a wonderful hour together. Gran holds onto my hand the entire time, as if she's worried "Soutarou-kun" will disappear if she lets go. We continue to talk about trivial things until Gran says she's tired and wants to lie down. As soon as we leave the hospital, Sakurako-san grabs my arm.

"Shoutarou."

"...Sorry for… Pretending to be Soutarou-kun."

"Why are you apologizing? I was going to apologize to you. I forced you to play that role," she says, looking sorry.

"I'm worried that I ruined your memories of Soutarou-kun."

"...No, don't worry about that. He was one of a kind. It's been a long time since I saw Ume that happy. I'm grateful… Truly. It's all thanks to you."

"In that case, please let me continue."

"Hm?"

"Please let me continue to visit her as 'Soutarou-kun' for a while. I'll still study like I should. I won't let it get in the way of my exams."

I love Gran. Thanks to her, I've made so many memories, and gotten to eat all kinds of delicious foods. There were times when her

advice saved me. If there's any way I can return even a small piece of that love, then I'll become 'Soutarou-kun' as many times as it takes. Even if she forgets all about "Shoutarou."

"...When I first saw you, you were a younger, more timid kid."

"Yeah? But I'm taller than you are, now."

"That's right… You're not a 'Boy' anymore."

Sakurako-san cups both my cheeks in her hands and looks up at me. I'm shaken when I see the tears welling up in her eyes. But she doesn't shed a single tear. Instead, she wipes them away with the back of her hand and smiles.

"If it's not too much of a bother to you, I'd like you to do that. I want to show Ume my gratitude until the end. Of course, I won't let it get in the way of your studying."

"Bring it on, 'Nee-san.'"

After that, I began visiting Gran in the hospital as "Soutarou-kun." All the nurses treat me as "little brother Soutarou-kun." Sakurako-san also starts letting me be present when the doctors are explaining things. Then, for the first time, Sakurako-san realizes that she's truly worried about seeing Gran off on her own. I stay by Gran's side, watching her illness progress a little each day. I spend almost every day studying in the hospital with her. Gran is completely convinced that I'm "Soutarou-kun", but I can't say if that goes for everyone.

I've always regretted that I didn't get closer to my grandma before she passed away. There aren't many chances in life to do things over. I don't know if this is right or wrong, all I know is that I want to love "my grandma" as much as possible. Just when the name "young master Soutarou" was starting to feel normal to me, Gran went to sleep. It was the day that the first snow of the winter fell in Asahikawa, a little later than it usually does.

Sakurako-san didn't cry. She stayed strong until the end. I cried. I cried a lot. Enough for the both of us. It's lonely and sad, but it'll be okay. She won't have to suffer anymore, and the real Soutarou-kun will be waiting for her in heaven. It's time for me to pass the baton to him. I have to go back to being Shoutarou Tatewaki now. But it also marks the end of my time with Sakurako-san.

“Naoe is going to be working overseas for a while, and he asked me if I wanted to go with him. I talked with Isozaki about it, and he said one of his friends from university who works in a forensic anthropology lab. I’ve read their papers many times.”

Unfortunately, there are very few universities in Japan that do forensic anthropology research.

“So I’ll be able to study there for a while,” Sakurako-san says with a smile on the way home from the funeral, wearing her mourning dress.

I think it’s my first time seeing her wearing all black clothes. As Sakurako-san has said before, black is the colour of mourning, but it also conveys the will to live.

“I’ll be lonely, but I also think you should become a proper researcher. I don’t mean to sound like Isozaki-sensei, but I have a feeling that one day you’ll publish research that will astonish humanity.”

“Hahaha, both of you love to exaggerate. But thank you. If I hadn’t had you and Isozaki to encourage me, I probably would have stayed here forever.”

“...You’ll come back, right? To Asahikawa?”

“That’s what I intended to do, but…”

“But what?”

“I was thinking of selling the house–”

“No! You can’t!”

It’s not me who is frantically trying to stop Sakurako-san from saying anything more, it’s my mom who is with us.

“A home is its own kind of history. It’s like a thick, one of a kind book that’s soaked in the lives of each family member. You seem like the kind of person who doesn’t regret things, but… I’m sure there will come a day when you wish you could have written the rest of that book.”

“But…”

“If it’s a problem of finances, I can give you advice. It’s certainly true that maintaining a house costs money. A house that isn’t being lived in will especially deteriorate. But that’s my area of expertise.”

“Mom…”

“I don’t mind renting it to someone for you. I’ll choose someone who’ll take good care of it, and if they don’t, I’ll take care of it myself. So I think you should consider it a bit more before letting it go.”

“…”

Sakurako-san seems surprised by my mom’s enthusiastic spiel, but she listens quietly. I’m sure my mom knows that the Kujou house is too heavy and too lonely for Sakurako-san to bear right now. She wants to let go of the house to let go of the sad memories. But I think there will come a time when Sakurako-san wants to return to that house. That white estate. That old, white house is just like one of the specimens she loves so much. A place that passes on life, transcending time. So I’m certain we’ll return to it. Both Sakurako-san and myself. We’ll all meet again. Under that cherry blossom tree that has absorbed so much life in order to bloom.

“--Got it. I’ll leave it to you, then.”

Sakurako-san took more than enough time to think it over before coming to a decision. My mom smiles widely. I’m relieved, too.

“And if you have any problems… No, you can contact me even if you don’t. Ume-san was so kind to Shoutarou, I have to repay that kindness. Take care and have a safe trip. Come and visit any time.”

Sakurako-san blinks in surprise at my mom’s words.

“I… thought you didn’t like me.”

“You’re right, but there’s nothing I can do. People have bonds. Ties between people go beyond likes and dislikes.”

“I see… It’s strange, I thought I’d live a life free of human connections and things like that. But that day, the boy who reported me to the police thinking I was a bloodthirsty killer was the reason I was able to make so many connections. Even a butterfly can cause a storm in a distant land,” Sakurako-san says, laughing loudly.

Just then, I think I see a butterfly flapping its wings across the sky, but upon closer inspection, it’s just a fallen leaf.

“Oh… It’s snowing.”

I look up at the sky to see the fluffy snow fluttering down. The big flakes are blowing around in the wind, just like cherry blossom petals. It’s a fitting day to send Gran off. A kind, but sad day.

Final Part

“It feels like it’s been a long time since we got together like this,” Azechi says as she looks back at us with a smile on her face. She looks even more restless than usual as we walk through the park next to Asahikawa Airport.

“It does, doesn’t it? I’m a little happy, but also sad,” Kougami says, seeming a little more nervous than usual.

I more or less understand why.

“In the end… We’re all going our separate ways,” Imai says, his expression unchanging as always.

“Imai is going to Sapporo. Azechi is too, right?”

“Yeah, I’m originally from there, too. Imai and I will be going to different schools, and Sapporo is a big city, so we probably won’t run into each other much,” Azechi says with a shrug.

“I’m going to Asahikawa Medical University, so if either of you ever come back to Asahikawa, let’s definitely hang out,” Kougami says, hugging Azechi tightly.

“I chose Kyoushin University… I was really torn. I heard that Asahikawa Medical University’s forensic science course has really advanced DNA identification technology. I also thought about going to Sapporo and learning from Aoba-san and Shitara-sensei.”

“Kyoushin University… In Tokyo, huh? Will a country bumpkin like you be okay there?”

“In Mitaka, right? Tatewaki-kun, I don’t think you’ll be able to get off the crowded trains.”

“That’s only if he can get on in the first place.”

“That’s true…”

“You three need to stop saying whatever you want.”

But truthfully, I’m a little bit worried about whether I'll be okay in Tokyo… It’s a scary city.

“But I’ll definitely come back to Asahikawa. It’s where I was born, after all.”

After talking for a while, it soon comes time for us to head to the airport. Isozaki-sensei and Utsumi-san, who arrived before us, wave us over. However, the two people we’re waiting for don’t show up until

the very last minute. Sakurako-san walks in wearing a white dress, just like when I first saw her.

“Geez, I’m worried about how you’ll fare without Osawa-san around.”

It’s the first day of their trip, and Ariwara-san is already grumbling that he’s fed up with Sakurako-san.

“Don’t worry. I’m just not used to it. Despite what you might think, I’m adaptable.”

“You’re uncooperative, though,” Isozaki-sensei mutters as Sakurako-san puffs out her chest with misplaced confidence.

“No matter where she is, she seems unbothered even though she’s a bother to everyone else.”

Azechi is merciless.

“I’m right here, you know.” Sakurako-san frowns.

“You can do whatever you want as long as you don’t drag my name through the mud.”

“I’ll actually improve your reputation… Ugh!”

Sakurako-san replies to Isozaki-sensei fearlessly, but before she can finish, Kougami jabs her in the chest.

“Be careful on your trip! I’ll be waiting for you!” Kougami starts to cry, as if she has finally reached her limit.

“You don’t have to make such a big deal about it. You can talk face to face online using YOOM…” Azechi says with a stiff expression. I can’t tell if she’s jealous, or genuinely put off.

“But we can’t touch, and there’s a time difference!”

“You can come visit during long breaks. You’re always welcome–”

“I’ll definitely visit!” Kougami replies eagerly before Ariwara-san can finish his sentence.

“I wanna go, too. Let’s meet at the new Kujou house during summer break.”

That certainly sounds appealing. While I watch the group with a smile, Utsumi-san taps on my shoulder.

“Sho-chan.”

“Yes?”

“You’ve been quiet for a while. Are you okay?”

“Hm? Well… It’s not like we’re saying goodbye forever.”

And honestly, I don’t really know what to say.

“At times like this, it’s important to be honest. You never know what might happen. If you don’t want to have regrets, you should cherish this chance– Go on!”

It’s finally time for them to check in for boarding, so I’m practically pushed out by force. What should I say…?

“Umm…”

“Boy… Congratulations on getting into university.”

“Oh, uh… You, too. Congratulations on getting to study abroad.”

“I… Thought you’d always be a child. You used to vomit every time you saw a dead body, but now you’re on the path to becoming a forensic scientist,” Sakurako-san says with a laugh.

It’s true. You never know what’ll happen in this world.

“...”

With that, the conversation stops. Both of us feel strangely awkward.

“Come on, Shou-chan,” Utsumi-san says, jabbing me in the shoulder.

Seriously… I guess it’s unavoidable…

“...I’m glad I met you.”

“You’re exaggerating again. But… I am, too. I’m glad you were with me.”

Hearing that, tears well up in my eyes and make me feel like I’m about to cry again.

“Don’t look at me like that. Don’t worry, we’ll meet again soon.”

“...”

We can meet any time we want, of course. We can talk online, and it’s not like we’re leaving Asahikawa forever… But we’ll probably be a little different from how we are now. I understand why. I can feel it. My time as Sakurako-san’s “Boy” is over.

“Sakurako-san.”

This will surely be both the first and the last time this happens. I hug Sakurako-san tightly. Then, I kiss her on the forehead.

“Have a safe trip, ‘Nee-san.’ Don’t eat too many sweets, okay?”

When I let go, Sakurako-san lets out an embarrassed laugh and says “I can’t make any promises.”

“...Are you okay with this?”

Isozaki-sensei, who has been watching us, asks Ariwara-san with a grin. “It’s just a greeting,” Ariwara-san replies with a calm expression.

I know, I get it. This is just an ordinary greeting.

“Sorry to interrupt this touching scene, but the plane is about to take off, Sakurako,” Ariwara-san says with a strained smile.

“Ah! Just wait a second! Let’s take one, final picture together! Smile!” Azechi-san says as she readies her phone.

Sakurako-san and I smile with slightly red cheeks.

On that day, when we took a photo with our brightest smiles, I grew from a boy into an adult.

Epilogue

Sakurako-san went down the path to becoming a forensic anthropologist. After returning to Japan, she did research at a museum. Yamaji-san left his hometown of Mashike to work in Sapporo at a crime prevention and security company. He also volunteers at kindergartens and elementary schools to do crime prevention talks. Isozaki-sensei is the same as always, except that on weekends he spends his time blissfully alone, surrounded by flowers at Shouko-san’s villa. Utsumi-san is the same, as well. He’s still a police officer who helps people in trouble and protects the town.

Shitara-sensei left the hospital, and now lives with Shouko-san. She sold her house in Asahikawa where she grew all those roses so that she could buy a villa with a beautiful garden. She wanted Shitara-sensei to be able to spend what little time he had left in peace and quiet.

Azechi is apparently a great student at the police academy she’s in. I’m sure she’ll make a great officer. Imai ended up leaving Asahikawa without ever telling Kougami how he felt about her. He

recently sent me a picture of himself with a really cute girl saying that he had a new girlfriend. Congrats. Have fun!

My grandpas are all as energetic as ever. Thanks to having those three reliable grandpas nearby, I have the courage to leave my mom and set off on my own.

Also, Hector lives at my house now. Hector sleeps too much to be called a guard dog, but his adorable smile and fluffy fur help keep my mom from being lonely now that she's living alone. Sometimes Kougami comes by to play with him or take him on walks.

In the end, Kougami decided to become an obstetrician instead of a forensic scientist. She had a wonderful encounter that helped her choose her own path, but that's a story for another time.

Since leaving Asahikawa, I'm struggling to adapt to living in the city alone. Sometimes I meet up with my brother, though. I always have dreams about Asahikawa that leave me feeling lonely when I wake up. Sometimes I crave the pudding, taiyaki, shinkoyaki, or other flavours from home that leave me in agony. On nights when I feel really homesick, I eat the vitamin castellas that my mom sometimes sends, and drink tea from my favourite tea shop. Why doesn't Tokyo have Secoma? I've looked everywhere for Katsugen and Napolin, but I haven't found any. (I saw Yakiben for the first time in a while recently.) Thinking back on it now, my hometown is truly beautiful and endearing.

Even the ordinary scenery makes me want to hold it close. I miss the wind, air, and bright blue sky. I wanted to leave that city so much, but now I wish I could go back tomorrow. It's something you can only understand once you've left. Asahikawa really is a lovely city.

But when you move to a different place, you meet new people. Meeting people is how you grow. What I need now is to learn. The reason I wanted to move away from everyone is because I want to grow more than anything else. I wanted to get away from the city where so much has happened, away from my memories, and focus on my studies. And the truth is, it's really because Sakurako-san isn't there. It feels lonely living in Asahikawa without her.

But life here is 100 times more intense than I expected. I can't just vaguely say "I'm lonely" when I'm constantly rushing along like cherry blossom petals that could fall at any moment. As for my new life as a forensic pathologist– well, that's another story.

"Tatewaki! Remains found in Tamagawa have just arrived!"

Just as my lunch break is about to end and I'm finishing up my curry of the day (which is hamburger curry!), my friend Usagi, aka Usami, calls for me.

"Aww, I shouldn't have had such a big lunch."

Usagi, who finished her lunch just before me, slumps her shoulders in disappointment.

"Yeah. You seriously have to be prepared for drowning victims."

"Geez! You don't have to tell me that! I know!"

No, maybe you don't understand. If you aren't used to it, drowned bodies are tough. Everything about them is harder. It really drives home that humans are terrestrial animals– just as I'm lost in thought, my phone beeps to indicate I have an incoming message. Once the autopsy begins, I can't look at my phone for a while. I have a second right now, so I pull out my phone, and instantly freeze.

"...What's wrong?"

"..."

Usagi is suspicious since I stopped when I had just started waking.

"A text? Oh, what? Is it a girl?" She grins and pulls on my arm until she can see my screen.

"Hey… Stop it!"

"Hehehe, let's see, it's from Phant–"

"Don't worry about it!" I violently shake her off before she can finish reading it out loud.

Usagi looks surprised, and gives a worried laugh. "You don't need to be so angry. 'The game begins,' is it your friend? Or what? Are they from Hokkaido?"

"...No, we're not friends."

"Hm? Is that so?"

Right. We're not friends- this is my life. I'm not going to play games. I quickly delete the message without looking at its contents.

櫻子さんの
足下には
死体が
埋まっている
応援ありがとうございました。
これからのあなたの人生が
骨のあるものでありますように。
太田紫織 イラスト／鉄雄